Reading V.S. Naipaul : fiction and history 1967-1987

Thesis

READING V.S. NAIPAUL: FICTION AND HISTORY, 1967-1987

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ABSTRACT

V.S. Naipaul has published almost equal amounts of fiction and non-fiction; he maintains that his nonfictional writing is an integral part of his work. This thesis is concerned with the way readers process the two types of narrative, with special reference to historical writing and the novel.

After a brief introductory survey of Naipaul's writing to date, chapter 1 explores some of the philosophical and historical issues underlying a comparative study of fiction and history. In chapter 2 attention switches to the reader's role; selected aspects of reader-response criticism are discussed in order to generate some questions that will need to be considered in a theory of reading taking account of fictional and non-fictional texts. Chapter 3 advances such a theory, based on the idea of opposing centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in reading.

In chapters 4-6 this theory is tested with three sets of readers, using two of Naipaul's books from the late 1960s, a novel (The Mimic Men) and a history (The Loss of El Dorado). In chapter 4 the readers are volunteers who took part in a research project aimed at finding out more about readers' initial orientations towards literary texts, and about reading strategies for different genres. Reviewers of The Mimic Men and The Loss of El Dorado form the second group of readers (chapter 5) and the two sets of reviews are analysed for evidence of centrifugal and centripetal reading. In chapter 6 the readers are academic critics and the materials are longer critical texts. Chapters 5 and 6 also raise questions about literary criticism as an institution, and the influence of interpretive communities.

In chapter 7 the centrifugal/centripetal theory is used to produce a reading of The Enigma of Arrival (1987), a novel which hovers on the borderline of nonfiction. Possibilities for further research are outlined briefly in the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul's literary output is nearly as difficult to define as his nationality. A third generation Indian, born and educated in Trindad, Naipaul came to England, to university, in 1950. England has remained his base, the starting- and returning-point for his travels, but the extent and frequency of these journeys lend an impermanent quality to his residence here. He describes himself as an exile or refugee, and although race and nationality are of recurring importance in his work, he writes from a position of rootlessness in which detachment is strength. Similarly, his solitary independence as a writer ("He has followed no other profession," states the brief biographical introduction in the Penguin editions of his work) is carefully maintained. He says:

> I have never had to work for hire; I made a vow at an early age never to work, never to become involved with people in that way. That has given me a freedom from people, from entanglements, from rivalries, from competition. 1

Such a vow cannot have been easy to keep in the early days when he was trying to get started as a writer. As a part-time freelance editor and presenter for the BBC Caribbean Service in 1954, he felt the word "freelance" suggested "only people on the fringe of a mighty enterprise, a depressed and suppliant class: I would have given a lot to be 'staff'." In "Prologue to an Autobiography" he goes on to recount how he used to describe himself on official forms as "broadcaster",

> thinking the word nondescript, suitable to someone from the freelances' room; until a BBC man, "staff", told me it was boastful.
>
> So I became "writer" . . . 2

"Writer" continues to be the most appropriate description for Naipaul. His work over the last thirty years has encompassed not only novels and short stories but an equally substantial amount of nonfiction. For some of his writings there is no easy classification. So besides being a writer of fiction he is, variously, a journalist, historian, essayist

travel-writer and political analyst.

Naipaul's stature as a writer can hardly be exaggerated. Literary prizes may not always be a reliable indicator of quality, but in Naipaul's case the sheer quantity of awards is impressive. These prizes are not just for his fiction (although he has collected nearly every appropriate prize in Britain); he has also received the Jerusalem Prize for Among the Believers, An Islamic Journey. He is frequently mentioned as a likely candidate for the Nobel Prize, and was recently honoured with a knighthood. His publishers, André Deutsch, recognized the importance of his work by issuing a collected edition ("The Uniform Russell Edition") while he was still only in mid-career. He has been a controversial writer, but his literary reputation has steadily increased, so that while an occasional commentator may appear to resent his status as "the darling of liberal culture,"[3] the more usual response of reviewers and critics has been to heap superlatives upon him.

I should make it clear from the outset that in this thesis the quality of Naipaul's writing is taken for granted. His work has already been amply evaluated in several book-length studies and in an enormous number of shorter articles. Indeed, there is now a weighty body of Naipaul criticism, worldwide, in which his development is traced, his themes enumerated, his style analysed and the cultural complexities of his work unravelled. Many of these critical studies explore the relationship between his fictional and nonfictional work, a relationship which is of particular interest in the present literary climate, as the boundaries between different kinds of writing become less distinct.

Later in this thesis I shall be examining the responses of critics and reviewers to specific works by Naipaul, in order to analyse some of the conventions and assumptions which govern the reading of fiction and nonfiction (especially history). This analysis will be based on a

hypothesis that readers in fact employ different kinds of reading for the two different kinds of narrative. But since the actual reading process can only be observed at a distance in the writings of reviewers and critics, the hypothesis will initially be tested against the responses of informants who volunteered to take part in a reading research project. To establish a context for this empirical inquiry, chapter 1 will address some of the theoretical questions raised by a comparative study of fictional and nonfictional narratives, and chapter 2 will focus on the role of the reader, drawing on the work of critics such as Iser, Culler and Fish. Chapter 3 sets out in detail my hypothesis of centrifugal and centripetal reading. The texts chosen as a basis for testing this hypothesis are Naipaul's fifth novel, The Mimic Men (1967) and his history of Trinidad, The Loss of El Dorado (1969); readings of the two texts by three different sets of readers will be discussed in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Finally, the same hypothesis will be used to produce a reading of The Enigma of Arrival (1987), a work which announces itself to be a novel, but has a strong autobiographical undertow. Since there will not be a place in the body of the thesis for a straightforward survey of Naipaul's published work to date, the remainder of this Introduction will briefly outline the range and diversity of Naipaul's writing, with reference to genre as much as subject-matter, concluding with some of his own statements on the nature and status of fiction, and the function of the writer.

Naipaul's first publishable work, Miguel Street, is a collection of linked tales and sketches about the (mainly eccentric) inhabitants of a Port of Spain street; Miguel Street is more than a street, it is almost a self-contained world, and although the young narrator is fretting to leave it by the end of the book, the tone of the portrayal is on the

whole affectionate, funny and nostalgic. Although completed in 1955, Miguel Street was not published until 1959, after two more conventionally shaped works of fiction, The Mystic Masseur (1957) and The Suffrage of Elvira (1958). In these two novels the setting again is Trinidad, and the period is the near-present. Miguel Street and The Mystic Masseur both refer to the impact on Trinidad of the Second World War (American bases and economic boom) and Ganesh, the central character of The Mystic Masseur, appears briefly in Miguel Street as an up-and-coming politician, cashing in on the wide-open opportunities of post-war democracy:

> Ganesh Pundit has given up mysticism for a long time. He had taken to politics and was doing very nicely. He was a minister of something or other in the government, and I heard people saying that he was in the running for the MBE. 4

In The Suffrage of Elvira the political trickery represented by Ganesh turns to full-scale fraudulence and corruption as Naipaul portrays Trinidad's second general election, of 1950. The satire here is sharper than in the previous two works, and the narration more detached, but The Suffrage of Elvira still maintains a surface humour and the possibility of hopeful outcomes for Elvira's younger inhabitants.

Naipaul refers to these works as apprentice pieces,[5] and enjoyable though they are, there is a massive difference between the first three works of fiction and the fourth, A House for Mr Biswas (1961). Drawing on his childhood memories of his own father, Naipaul creates in the story of Mohun Biswas, sign-painter turned journalist, a Caribbean epic of Dickensian scope. A House for Mr Biswas established Naipaul as a major novelist and it has proved to be his best-selling book. It also marks off the end of the first phase in his writing career, a phase which included some journalism (particularly fiction reviews for the New Statesman) but was dominated by novels and short stories [6] based on his memories of Trinidad.

Around 1960 Naipaul began to travel, and the first book-length

product of his journeys was The Middle Passage (1962), an account of five West Indian and South American societies. In the book's Foreword, Naipaul spoke of the difficulties he faced when he turned to writing non-fiction:

> The novelist works towards conclusions of which he is often unaware; and it is better that he should. To analyse and decide before writing would rob the writer of the excitement which supports him during his solitude, and would be the opposite of my method as a novelist. I also felt it as a danger that, having factually analysed the society as far as I was able, I would be unable to think of it in terms of fiction and that in anything I might write I would be concerned only to prove a point.

In fact what seems to have happened is that the journeys and non-fictional writings have provided a stimulus for the fiction, though not always in the most direct and obvious way. For example, Mr Stone and the Knights Companion (1963), Naipaul's only novel so far to use English characters in an English setting, was written in Srinagar, during his year-long residence in India. The journey to India was, said Naipaul, a search for "the background of my childhood" which ended in "futility and impatience."[7] The resultant book, An Area of Darkness (1964), is more autobiographical than The Middle Passage, and near the end Naipaul refers to a letter he wrote to an Indian friend on his return to Europe: "I forget now what I wrote. It was violent and incoherent; but, like everything I wrote about India, it exorcized nothing."[8]

Writing as an attempt at exorcism becomes one of the themes of Naipaul's next novel, The Mimic Men (1967). Its narrator, Ralph Singh, is living in England, exiled from the Caribbean island of Isabella (a fictional island closely resembling Trinidad) where he grew up and was later an entrepreneur and politician. He has ambitions to write a history that would reveal the restlessness, the "deep disorder" brought about in the West Indies by the clash and upheaval of empires, an ambition inspired by the thought of "the calm and the order" which the act of writing would imply.[9] All that he does produce is a personal

history, and the novel is structured in such a way that Singh's narrative appears to follow the unpredictable ebb and flow of memory rather than the chronological sequence of an ordered history. Naipaul also produced another work of fiction in 1967, A Flag on the Island, a collection of short stories, some of them dating back to the 1950s, and the title novella, written in 1965 as a story for a film. But the main direction of his writing at this period was towards the historical project which defeated Ralph Singh. Within two months of completing The Mimic Men, Naipaul was at work on a history of Trinidad, published in 1969 as The Loss of El Dorado. Spanning the period 1592-1813, the book "attempts to record . . . two moments . . . when Trinidad was touched by 'history'" and thus show "how a colony was created in the New World."[10]

Naipaul's travels during the late 1960s (which included visits to Africa, India again, and the United States) produced a crop of articles, some of which were collected in The Overcrowded Barracoon (1972), his fourth book of nonfiction. But between The Loss of El Dorado and The Overcrowded Barracoon there was another work of fiction, In a Free State (1971). In terms of structure this is an innovative work. The title novella, set in Africa, is preceded by two shorter stories, and the whole sequence is set within a documentary-style framework, with a prologue and epilogue "from a Journal" - a traveller's journal. All five sections of the book are about characters who are in some sense displaced, and despite the tonal range of the various parts, the work is further unified by the sense of violence which is always threatening or erupting into the action.

Although In a Free State was awarded the Booker McConnell Prize for Fiction, its fragmented structure raised some speculation that Naipaul had reached the end of the line as far as the novel was concerned. In fact he went on to produce two further works of fiction in the 1970s,

but the impetus for both novels arose directly out of nonfictional writings. These nonfictional pieces were collected under the title The Return of Eva Peron (published in America 1980, Britain 1981) and in the Author's Note which prefaces the collection we can see how far Naipaul has moved from the position outlined in the Foreword to The Middle Passage:

> These pieces . . . were written between 1972 and 1975. They bridged a creative gap: from the end of 1970 to the end of 1973 no novel offered itself to me. That perhaps explains the intensity of some of the pieces, and their obsessional nature. The themes repeat, whether in Argentina, Trinidad or the Congo. . . . it should be said that, out of these journeys and writings, novels did in the end come to me.

The connexion between the first of these pieces, "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad", and Naipaul's next novel, Guerrillas (1975), is direct and unmistakable. The characters, setting and horrific events of the Michael X story, which Naipaul first described in articles for the Sunday Times, are closely paralleled in the novel; an important thematic link is that both works deal with the power of the written word, whether it be couched in fictional or nonfictional form, and the responsibility this places upon the writer. However, in spite of many correspondences, "The Killings in Trinidad" and Guerrillas offer very different reading experiences: events in "The Killings in Trinidad" are dramatised and commented on with certainty and conviction, but the reader of Guerrillas is given no secure place from which to observe events, no character with whom s/he can fully identify, and no judgement or shred of comfort from the detached, invisible narrator. Another nonfictional article in The Return of Eva Peron out of which a novel later came is "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa." This analysis of postcolonial Zaire supplies the broad historical and political themes as well as much of the physical detail for A Bend in the River (1979). The links between these two works are analysed in my article "Past and Present Darkness: Sources for V.S. Naipaul's A Bend in the River"

in Modern Fiction Studies, vol. 30, no. 3 (see Bibliography).

Between Guerrillas and A Bend in the River Naipaul published another nonfictional work, India: A Wounded Civilization (1977). He had visited India again in the wake of the 1975 Emergency, and the account of his second journey is a work of analysis as well as exploration. In the Foreword, describing it as "an inquiry about Indian attitudes", he sounds an autobiographical note once more:

> An inquiry about India - even an inquiry about the Emergency - has quickly to go beyond the political. It has to be an inquiry about Indian attitudes; it has to be an inquiry about the civilization itself, as it is. And though in India I am a stranger, the starting-point of this inquiry - more than might appear in these pages - has been myself.

This passage helps to confirm what commentators have been pointing out for some time,[11] that is, the continuing influence of Naipaul's life and background on his writing. Long-running expectation of an outright autobiography was partly satisfied in 1983 by the publication, in the Sunday Times, of "Prologue to an Autobiography" in which there are accounts of his family history and his own initiation as a writer. The full text of "Prologue to an Autobiography" subsequently formed the first part of Finding the Centre: Two Narratives (1984); the second narrative is an account of a visit to the Ivory coast, using material which, Naipaul says in the Author's Foreword, could have become either fiction or nonfiction. The two personal narratives are offered as a book not only because they were written alongside each other but also because "both pieces are about the process of writing. Both pieces seek in different ways to admit the reader to that process." The emphasis which in this thesis is placed on the reader should thus be seen as arising from Naipaul's conception of the writing process as well as from a more general conviction of the importance of the reader's role.

The Foreword to Finding the Centre is packed with ideas which are relevant to the present study. In addition to his statements about the reader's part in the process of writing and the rich potential of his

material as far as genre is concerned, Naipaul refers again to his initial uncertainties about writing nonfiction: "My instinct was towards fiction; I found it constricting to have to deal with fact." This tension is resolved in his later work, he suggests, partly through learning to recognize his own instincts as a traveller, in a way that dispensed with the need for a "role": "I. . . was content to be myself, to be what I had always been, a looker." The products of this travel-writing method are the second piece in Finding the Centre, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" and two longer books, Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981), the record of a long and strenuous trip from Iran to Indonesia, and A Turn in the South (1989), a study of the southern United States. But the Foreword to Finding the Centre also suggests another way that the fact/fiction tension has been resolved. In that book, he says, his aim was narrative:

> The reader will see how the material was gathered; he will also see how the material could have served fiction or political journalism or a travelogue. But the material here serves itself alone: "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" offers the experience of travel and human discovery for its own sake. All that was added later was understanding. Out of that understanding the narrative came.

However, this is not to say that Naipaul has abandoned distinctions between different kinds of writing in favour of an all-embracing super-genre. When The Enigma of Arrival was published in 1987, some reviewers were puzzled by the title-page announcement "A novel in five sections" since the work contains so much that is autobiographical, the unnamed narrator apparently corresponding closely to Naipaul in terms of background, career and temperament. But after the publication of "Prologue to an Autobiography" Naipaul had already said in interview that there would probably never be a substantive version: "It would be a pack of lies, wouldn't it, if one wrote an autobiography. You'd have to suppress all sorts of motives and just say what you did."[12] There are absences in The Enigma of Arrival which would make it an incomplete

and therefore untruthful autobiography. As I shall be suggesting in chapter 7, The Enigma of Arrival both uses and challenges expectations of genre. It does this in such a way that the reading process involves continual balancing and negotiation between the shaping power of fictional form on the one hand and, on the other, the truthful interpretation and expression of experience.

It is, I hope, clear from this short survey that Naipaul's writing has raised and continues to raise important questions about the nature of fiction. I have already referred, in quotations from various Author's Forewords, to Naipaul's reflections on his own practice as a writer of fiction and nonfiction. He has not been reticent in discussing what the activity of writing involves for him, but when invited to contribute introductory remarks to an entry on his works in the directory Contemporary Novelists, he was understandably reluctant to label his writing:

> I feel that any statement I make about my own work would be misleading. The work is there: the reader must see what meaning, if any, the work has for him. All I would like to say is that I consider my nonfiction an integral part of my work. 13

Naipaul has also had much to say, in more general terms, about fiction and the role of the writer. So to close this Introduction, here is a selection of quotations, spanning twenty-five years, which have a bearing on some of the themes to be developed in the course of this thesis:

> The artist . . . who seeks only to record abandons half his responsibility. . . . He does not impose a vision on the world. He accepts; he might even make romantic; but he invariably ends by assessing men at their own valuation. 14

> There's something absurd about the fictional form: it's an artificial activity, made-up people taking part in invented actions. The first thing for the writer is to understand why he's setting all these people in motion. 15

> Fiction never lies. . . . It reveals the writer totally. 16

> The novel as a form no longer carries conviction. Experimentation, not aimed at the real difficulties, has corrupted response; and there is great confusion in the minds of readers and writers about the purpose of the novel. The novelist, like the painter, no longer recognizes his interpretive function; he seeks to go beyond it; and his audience diminishes. And so the world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on, and there is no one to awaken the sense of true wonder. That is perhaps a fair definition of the novelist's purpose, in all ages. [17]

> People can hide behind direct statements; fiction, by its seeming indirections, can make hidden impulses clear. [18]

> Literary forms are necessary: experience has to be transmitted in some agreed or readily comprehensible way. But certain forms, like fashions in dress, can at times become extreme. And then, far from crystallizing or sharpening experience, can falsify or be felt as a burden. . . . Our ideas of literary pleasures and narrative have in fact changed in the last hundred years or so. All the writing of the past century, and the cinema, and television have made us quicker. And the nineteenth-century English writers who now give me the most "novelistic" pleasure - provide windows into human lives, encouraging reflection - are writers who in their own time would not have been thought of as novelists at all.
>
> I am thinking of writers like Richard Jefferies, whose essays about farming people carry so much knowledge and experience that they often contain whole lives. Or William Hazlitt. Or Charles Lamb, concrete and tough and melancholy, not the gentle, wishy-washy essayist of legend. Or William Cobbett, the journalist and pamphleteer, dashing about the countryside, and in his break-neck prose, and through his wild prejudices, giving the clearest pictures of the roads and the fields and the people and the inns and the food. All of these writers would have had their gifts diluted or corrupted by the novel form as it existed in their time. All of them, novelistic as they are in the pleasures they offer, found their own forms. [19]

CHAPTER 1 : FICTION AND HISTORY

Naipaul's statement that "fiction never lies" plays against the everyday notion of fiction as that which is not true. But "fiction" is a complex and historically variable term, probably impossible to define satisfactorily. Once we start to ask "What is fiction?" certain problems and assumptions come to light, and the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is no longer as straightforward as it looks. The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore some historical, philosophical and aesthetic issues underlying the conventional fiction/nonfiction divide, with particular reference to two genres: the novel and historical writing. Since these issues touch on a number of different disciplines, the emphasis here (as in chapter 2) will be on breadth rather than depth. The discussion which follows should provide a general framework for the development of a theory of reading in chapter 3 and for an analysis of readings of specific texts in chapters 4-7.

When we yoke together the terms "fiction" and "nonfiction" what probably comes to mind first is the library and book-trade division of printed matter into novels and short stories in one category and everything else in the other. But in its widest sense the word "fiction" can be used to designate any mental construct by which we seek to impose order and meaning on an otherwise formless world of experience. Thus what are apparently "facts" of history, and even mathematical or abstract concepts such as time, can be described as "fictions". As we shall see when we come to the subject of historical writing, this kind of usage is especially important in an approach to narrative which stresses the "made" qualities of literary prose. The term "nonfiction" cannot be applied quite so universally - as an antonym its scope is already limited - but in its library/book-trade sense it embraces an enormous range of writings.

Some nonfiction, such as biography, is of a markedly literary nature, but the nonfiction section of a library or bookshop will also include a large proportion of non-literary books, such as car manuals, and works with scarcely any language content, such as art-books; the category "nonfiction" is anything but homogeneous. When we consider "fiction" and "nonfiction" in relation to a particular type of text - the literary prose narrative - these very broad usages of the terms obviously have to be narrowed down. But it is still worth remembering that the implications behind such broad, sweeping approaches to the two terms (particularly the implication that nonfiction relates to the real world and is serious, therefore fiction is not) may still colour our understanding of the terms even when we use them in a more limited sense.

Since the word "literary" has several times crept into the previous paragraph, this is perhaps a good point at which to discount those definitions of fiction which equate "imaginative writing" with the concept of literature as a whole. There are three objections to this kind of definition. The first is that "literary" is an evaluative word - usually positive in its orientation - and not all kinds of fictional writing achieve the necessary status threshold. These thresholds are determined by cultural consensus, so they are subject to change, but away from the borderline area there is usually agreement, at any given period, about what kinds of fiction are or are not literature. For example, comics and advertisements are not likely to figure in the literature syllabuses of educational institutions (although they may appear elsewhere, maybe in a communication studies syllabus); the currently rising status of some "popular fiction" genres such as detective novels and thrillers leaves more room for argument. The second difficulty with this kind of definition is that many works which have a claim to be regarded as literature cannot be described as fictional. Again, we could look at the literature syllabus of a university English department for examples: we might well

find there the nonfictional prose of writers known primarily as poets and novelists (Donne's sermons, Milton's pamphlets, Orwell's essays) or the work of historians such as Gibbon or Macaulay. Historical writing is an especially interesting case, to be considered in detail later in this chapter, but there is also a large grey area of borderline genres such as memoirs, biography and travel-writing in which actual rather than imagined worlds are represented. So just as the growing prestige of some kinds of popular fiction has recently challenged assumptions about "quality" in literature, the increasing volume of contemporary writing "between the genres" challenges the "imaginative" criterion for literature. The third problem with the "literature equals fiction" approach is, as David Lodge points out, that

> the concept of "fiction" has to be stretched somewhat to cover propositions as well as descriptions, since a good deal of literature (e.g. lyrical and didactic poetry) consists of the former rather than the latter. 1

Narrative poetry and drama could be more fairly described as fictional, but it is to prose works, particularly the novel, that the "fiction" label usually adheres. Short stories and novellas clearly share the same fictional attributes as novels, but short fiction has not enjoyed the same prestige or social significance.

So while the concept of literature includes more than "imaginative writing", for most of this century the products of the fictionalising imagination have been the most valued forms of literature, and of these the novel has been the most prominent. Inevitably, as the novel has consolidated its position in the centre of the literary stage, nonfictional forms have been edged out into the wings. Travel-writing is just one area which has been eclipsed in this way, but in recent years the distinguished work of both practitioners and critics has combined to retrieve the declining status of the genre. Paul Fussell, in his book Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars is concerned to

reinstate travel-writing as a "creative" branch of literature, and in the following passage he offers a cogent account of how over-valuation of the novel has affected nonfictional genres:

> the genres with current prestige are the novel and the lyric poem, although it doesn't seem to matter that very few memorable examples of either ever appear. The status of those two kinds is largely an unearned and unexamined snob increment from late-romantic theories of imaginative art as religion-cum-metaphysics. Other kinds of works - those relegated to simple-minded categories like "the literature of fact" or "the literature or argument" - are in lower esteem artistically because the term creative has been widely misunderstood, enabling its votaries to vest it with magical powers. Before that word had been promoted to the highest esteem, that is, before the romantic movement, a masterpiece was conceivable in a "nonfictional" genre like historiography or biography or the travel book. As recently as 1918 things were different. Fiction had not yet achieved its current high status. . . . In the Century Magazine for February 1918, Henry Seidel Canby felt obliged to plead for the dignity and importance of fiction, which, as an editorial in the New York Times Review of Books commented, the reading public was accustomed to treat with a "certain condescension". But now a similar condescension is visited on forms thought to be nonfictional. 2

Leaving aside for the moment the status of fiction within the literary canon, the passage just quoted also serves to remind us of another approach to the meaning of "fiction", in which it is contrasted with "fact". The caution with which Fussell uses phrases such as "literature of fact" and "nonfictional" draws attention to the point that a clear-cut distinction between the fictional and the factual is not always possible. Quite apart from the epistemological problems involved in establishing what "facts" are, we need to remember that the concepts of fact and fiction have changed over time. Terry Eagleton points out that

> In the English late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the word "novel" seems to have been used about both true and fictional events, and even news reports were hardly to be considered factual. Novels and news reports were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional: our own sharp discriminations between these categories simply did not apply. 3

Another change which may occur over time is in the actual classification of literary works as fictional or factual. Sometimes the re-classification may result from scholarly detective work (some of Defoe's

journalism, for example, was once thought to be fictional), but sometimes it reflects a fundamental change in the approach of readers. Again, Eagleton provides telling examples:

> Gibbon no doubt thought that he was writing the historical truth, and so perhaps did the authors of Genesis, but they are now read as "fact" by some and "fiction" by others. 4

So, since apparently opposed approaches can co-exist, it seems that fictionality is not so much an inherent quality of the text as an attribute assigned by readers - a point to which I shall return shortly.

Among the various factors which could be held to account for fundamental shifts in approach such as Eagleton describes, one of the most important is surely our attitude towards verbal artefacts. In a world where most major events, both private and public, are photographed or televised, our sense of things happening is more often confirmed by visual than by verbal evidence. At the same time, the relationship between words and external reality has been exhaustively scrutinized by twentieth-century philosophers. Wittgenstein's famous description of philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" [5] illustrates the mistrust of words which is now such an important part of our mental furniture.

When the relationship between "ordinary" language and its referents is seen as a matter of "bewitchment", the language of fiction presents even greater problems. There are no special features by which we can identify a stretch of discourse as fictional, and yet we generally do distinguish novels and short fiction from other kinds of writing without much difficulty, and in consequence approach the relationship between the words and their referents quite differently. John Searle's influential article "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" poses this problem in the form of a paradox:

> how can it be both the case that words and their elements in a fictional story have their ordinary meanings and yet the rules

> that attach to those words and other elements and determine their meanings are not complied with? 6

Searle's resolution of this paradox depends on two main factors: knowledge of the illocutionary intentions of the author (notably the intention to write a work of fiction) and the existence of a "set of conventions which suspend the normal operations of the rules relating to illocutionary acts and the world." These conventions are extralinguistic and nonsemantic; they "enable the speaker to use words with their literal meanings without undertaking those commitments that are normally required by those meanings." 7

The relationship between these two factors is clear enough: the writer invokes the conventions of fiction so that s/he can pretend to perform a series of illocutionary acts (these would generally be assertions or other types of "representative" illocutions) without undertaking the usual commitments implied by such acts. But Searle's emphasis on intention is problematic, and not altogether consistent with some of his other work on speech-act theory. The version of this theory which he inherited from J.L. Austin relied largely on invented rather than actual utterances, and so stressed the importance of the <u>speaker's</u> intentions in the production of illocutionary force. Searle's work on the structure of illocutionary acts (<u>Speech Acts</u> [1969] chapter 3) drew attention to the role of the <u>hearer</u>, whose participation in any illocutionary act is necessary for the fulfilment of what Searle called "preparatory rules". Thus the way was opened for a new account of the illocutionary force of an utterance - one which emphasised the listener's interpretation as much as the speaker's intention. It is therefore puzzling that in his analysis of fictional discourse Searle should have elevated the intentions of the author at the expense of the reader's interpretation. He maintains that

> What makes [a text] a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes towards it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it. 8

More simply, and perhaps more persuasively, he states: "Roughly speaking, whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide, whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide." [9] But the matter of authorial intention is not always as obvious as it might seem. An author's intentions are not always available for scrutiny, and we have already seen how the classification of works may change over time. In the case of "borderline" texts such as the autobiography or first-person novel, it may occasionally be the decisions of publisher or bookseller rather than the author's decisions that determine whether the work is presented as fictional or otherwise. Paul Fussell, in The Great War and Modern Memory, provides an example with Frank Conroy's Stop-Time: "The elements comprising Stop-Time appeared originally as 'short stories'; when collected, they presented themselves as a memoir." [10] So we are driven back to Searle's second factor, the existence of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions. However, as we shall see in chapter 2, these conventions are not invoked and operated solely by the author.

Another question which arises in Searle's article concerns the co-existence of fictional and what, by contrast, he calls "serious" utterances within the same text. He gives as an example the opening sentence of Anna Karenina: "Happy families are all happy in the same way, unhappy families unhappy in their separate, different ways." This, says Searle, is a "genuine" rather than a "pretended" assertion; it occurs within the context of a novel, but it is not fictional and not part of the story. He goes on to make a distinction between "a work of fiction" and "fictional discourse", noting that "a work of fiction need not consist entirely of, and in general will not consist entirely of, fictional discourse." [11] This is true enough, but the distinction between "fictional" and "serious" utterances is not always as obvious as in Searle's example. For one thing, fictional utterances will often, as Searle recognises, include references to real places, people and

events; these "real" references may be mixed with "pretended" references within the same illocutionary act. Searle's example from Anna Karenina is convenient but untypical. Another difficulty with Searle's kind of analysis is that the sentence, which in speech-act theory is the characteristic grammatical form of the illocutionary act, is not a complete unit of meaning in fictional discourse; the structures of meaning in fiction are much larger, and the meaning of any one sentence will depend to some extent on the context in which it occurs.

This last point is developed most effectively by Thomas Leitch in his article "To What is Fiction Committed?"

> Fictional sentences removed from their contexts make no commitments whatever because the fictional conventions which endow them with meaning seldom operate within the unit of the individual sentence. . . .
> . . . In the most general terms, the commitments of fiction are always tropic or figural; a work of fiction is not committed at the level of the propositions it advances (or, Searle would say, pretends to advance), but rather at the level of what those propositions implicate through the conventions of particular fictional genres. 12

An important element in Leitch's argument is that nonfictional works establish their implicata in a similar way, through generic conventions. This is perhaps not so immediately apparent, because literary criticism has been much more concerned with fictional than with nonfictional conventions, but Leitch regards both fiction and nonfiction as "institutional and multifarious, not natural and monolithic." 13

Leitch also points out that examining fictional sentences within their contexts is not straightforward either, because fictional works can invoke a variety of different contexts. Taking one of the examples Searle used in his article, Iris Murdoch's novel The Red and the Green, Leitch shows that this might be approached "in the context of other works of fiction, other novels, other historical novels, or other novels by Iris Murdoch; in each case the context would modify the reader's response to particular details." Additionally, fictional works have a special

ability to define their own contexts by presupposing acquaintance with other works of fiction; in this case, Iris Murdoch's title echoes Stendhal's The Red and the Black "in a way which arguably makes the earlier novel part of Murdoch's total context." Thus the total context of a given fictional sentence can seldom be precisely defined; it must mean "at least the context which the author controls and presents as unitary" - that is, all the words of the work in which the sentence appears - and it may actually include a great deal more. [14]

Leitch goes on to focus on just one of the possible contexts for The Red and the Green, the genre of the historical novel. Within the conventions of this genre, the writer can imply explanations about actual historical situations and events, which are arguably true, even though the particulars on which they are based may be invented. Leitch adduces from the opening of the novel an implied proposition about relationships between the British and the Irish at the time of the Easter Uprising, a proposition comparable with the kind an historian makes.

The novelist's propositions are not demonstrably true,

> but only because propositions of this sort - explanations on this level of abstraction - never are. Even in avowedly non-fictional works, historical explanations, though normally the implicata for whose sake a given work has been written, are never more than arguably true, that is, more or less convincing, because such explanations are by nature hypothetical. Readers of history assess its explanations as more or less satisfactory according to the evidence, the fairness and acuteness with which it is selected and weighed, and the openness with which alternative hypotheses are considered. In the case of historical novels, in which a good deal of the evidence for the implicated explanations is invented, this evidence must be made convincing in other ways: characters must be made vivid and recognizable, their motives, actions and relationships plausible in view of their historical circumstances. . . . Within the generic context the historical novel provides, Murdoch's implicated explanation of the Easter Uprising can be as true as any other. 15

Leitch suggests, then, that although the novelist and the historian are working within different conventions, they are working towards a similar end. Both convey serious speech acts in the same way, through the implicata required by their respective conventions.

It is instructive to compare the differences in approach between Searle's article and Leitch's answer. Whereas Searle is concerned with the illocutionary intentions of the author in differentiating fictional from nonfictional discourse, Leitch's emphasis on generic conventions in fact cuts across these "monolithic" categories. Another difference is that Searle judges the commitment of writers to their expressed propositions in accordance with a set of rules which have at their core a notion of "the truth" as something definite and knowable. Leitch suggests that truth is to some extent institutionally determined, and so, for example, when a piece of journalism contains errors, we assess the seriousness of the errors in accordance with "custom, courtesy and law" [16] rather than the abstract deliberations of philosophers of language.

The concept of "truth" has, of course, been at the heart of the fiction/nonfiction debate since the time of Aristotle and Plato, even though some of the key terms may have changed ("poetry" having become "fiction" and "history","nonfiction"). The views of the classical theorists are worth mentioning here, because they have been so influential. Although it is now nearly two and a half thousand years since Plato launched his attack on poets and Aristotle came to their defence, Plato's concern with the function of different kinds of art in society is of perennial importance, and variations on Aristotle's notion of "poetic truth" are still widely expounded today.

Many of Plato's most relevant pronouncements on the subject of poetry are contained in The Republic. In Book III he has Socrates discuss the various forms in which poetry can be presented, and uses for the first time the word "mimesis"; this has the sense not merely of "imitation" but also of "impersonation". Thus the potential for wilful deception, which Plato considers so dangerous, is introduced. Whilst art which imitates what is good and beautiful can play a useful

part in the education of the Republic's young, Plato maintains that the practice of imitating that which is bad can be harmful, since the imitation may infect reality. In Book X Plato develops a more comprehensive attack on poetry and the arts in general. Here the idea of mimesis as "representation" is related to his Theory of Ideas (or Forms). According to this theory, every object or event in the material world is no more than an imperfect copy of an ideal Form which has its existence in another, transcendent world. Since art only imitates the objects and events of the visible world, which are themselves imperfect, it is twice removed from the truth of ideal Forms, and thus unreliable as well as rather pointless. A further argument against poetry in particular is that it

> appeals to a low element in the mind. . . . [The poet] stirs up and encourages and strengthens the lower elements in the mind at the expense of reason, which is like giving power and political control to the worst elements in a state and ruining the better elements. 17

When these charges are combined with the argument from Book III that poetry exerts a bad moral effect, the case against the poets is complete, and Homer and his successors are banished from the Republic, or ideal state.

This is necessarily an over-simplified summary of Plato's views on poetry; other, more positive facets of his criticism emerge in the Phaedrus and The Laws. But his strictures against illusions survive today whenever the word "fiction" is used pejoratively, and the demoralising influence of such illusions was a live issue, with Puritan readers, during the first century (at least) of the novel's existence.

Aristotle is much more generous than Plato towards the purveyors of fiction. In chapter 4 of his Poetics he speaks positively about the instinct for imitation being "inherent in man from his earliest days."[18] He also describes the possibilities of acquiring learning as well as enjoyment from works of imitation. Then in chapter 9 he makes his

famous distinction between "poetic truth" and "historical truth":

> The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse; . . . the difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts. 19

Many later apologists for fiction have followed Aristotle in urging this kind of distinction. Sidney's Defence of Poetry (1595) emphasizes poetry's capacity to "teach and delight" and exalts it above other branches of learning:

> . . . the poet, with that same hand of delight doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth. And so a conclusion not unfitly ensue: that, as virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman. 20

In the contest between the poet and his competitors, Sidney sees the moral philsopher and the historian as the principal challengers. The philosopher's arguments, however, are too abstract, and Sidney's historian is a comically pathetic figure whose example is not at all likely to lead men to truth and virtue:

> he is laden with old mouse-eaten records, authorizing himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay; having much ado to accord differing writers and to pick truth out of their partiality; better acquainted with a thousand years ago than with the present age, and yet better knowing how this world goeth than his own wit runneth . . . 21

These aspersions aside, the main drawback of history, for Sidney as for Aristotle, is that it is "tied . . . to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things." 22

The Aristotelian concept of "poetic truth" is alive and well today, especially among practising writers. It offers an attractive justification to novelists at a time when the novel, the activity of novel-writing, and indeed the existence of authors,are all subject to doubting investigation. The late B.S. Johnson, in Aren't You Rather Young

to be Writing Your Memoirs?, claimed that for him a useful distinction between literature and other writing was that "the former teaches one something true about life." [23] Johnson also managed to reconcile aspects of Plato's views on illusions ("Telling stories is telling lies"[24]) with an Aristotelian belief in the truth-function of literature by cutting through the usual equation between "novel" and "fiction":

> The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel. 25

Johnson attached much importance to the autobiographical impulse in his work, and his experiments with the novel form were aimed at enabling him to "speak truth directly if solipsistically." [26] A rather different perspective on the uses of autobiography is offered by J.G. Ballard, whose novel Empire of the Sun draws on his own childhood experience as a detainee in wartime Shanghai. When asked how closely the experiences of the young hero Jim followed his own, Ballard replied: "The vast body of Jim's experiences are invented, though psychologically true. You fictionalise to reach the truth." [27] Like Johnson, Ballard is concerned here with expressing an inner and personal reality, but he assigns a more important role to imagination and invention than Johnson does; his position is probably closer to Naipaul's. However, Naipaul's work also reminds us that the notion of "poetic" or "fictional" truth need not be confined to the merely personal. Another case is that of Salman Rushdie (who has perhaps more cause than any other living writer to be aware of the relationship between fiction and public events); in more peaceful times (1984) he was asked whether he thought his novel Shame could change things politically in Pakistan; this was his reply:

> One hopes that it has effects on readers. It seems to me that the active imaging of a world accurately is one of the most truthful tools that human beings have as a way of understanding what's going on around them. That's what fiction does . . . 28

These examples could be multiplied, but I hope they are sufficient to show that the kind of truthfulness most often claimed for fiction is a

moral or perhaps metaphorical truth. However, the novel as a genre is closely associated with a more literal kind of truthfulness, since most novels not only refer to features of external reality, but also depend for much of their effect on seeming "true to life". The term "realism" is, like "fiction", slippery and difficult to define, but since the two concepts have for so long been closely linked, we need to consider, briefly, what their relationship implies.

In a technical sense, of course, it is impossible for a literary work to reproduce or represent real life in the way that visual media can. Even if, in the course of reading a novel, we can easily forget that the words themselves are merely signs, we cannot so easily overlook the linear nature of the text. A writer may employ devices such as first-person, present-tense narration in order to encourage a sense of immediacy, but even the most absorbing novel can never offer the simultaneous complexity of visual and aural stimuli that film or television can. However, dialogue in the novel can come close to an imitation of reality (although here the reader still has to supply the non-verbal features of speech) and, more importantly, the verbal text can imitate ways of thinking about reality. It can also, of course, imitate other ways of writing about reality, and it is this capacity which enables David Lodge to propose a working definition of realism in literature as

> the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in nonliterary texts of the same culture. Realistic fiction, being concerned with the action of individuals in time, approximates to history . . . Thus the realistic novel, from its beginnings in the eighteenth century, modelled its language on historical writing of various kinds, formal and informal: biography, autobiography, travelogue, letters, diaries, journalism and historiography. 29

Lodge is aware of the problems in setting up an "historical" conception of reality as being concrete and empirical, instead of being, as Hayden White would suggest, the product of historians' fictive capacities. (White's view of historical narratives as verbal fictions will be

discussed more fully later. For the moment it is sufficient to note his comments on how literary critics such as Northrop Frye, Erich Auerbach and others have tended to evade this recognition because a concept of "history" which stresses its interest in the "actual" has been so useful in defining "literature": "Thus within a long and distinguished critical tradition which has sought to determine what is 'real' and what is 'imagined' in the novel, history has served as a kind of archetype of the realistic pole of representation."[30] Nevertheless, Lodge's definition of realism in literature is of particular interest because of the close connection it implies between fiction and nonfiction, in terms of language and form as well as function.

If the relationship between realism and fiction began to develop in the eighteenth century through forms like the epistolary novel, it was cemented in the nineteenth century when the novel established itself not only as a major literary genre but also as a powerful instrument for examining and revealing the truth about contemporary society. In France the work of novelists such as Balzac and the Goncourt brothers proclaimed the union of realism and the novel in an explicit programme of social investigation. In England there was less theorizing, but the achievements of the Victorian novelists were equally significant and probably more diverse. Despite the interruptions of Modernism and post-1960 experimentation in the novel, the tradition of realism established in the nineteenth century is still very much alive. So the dominance of the realistic mode in literature has coincided with the epoch of industrial capitalism, and post-structuralist critics have pointed out that this raises another set of questions, this time with ideological as well as technical implications, about the realistic text and its relationship with the external world. These questions were first raised by Roland Barthes, most notably in his study of Balzac's story "Sarrasine", S/Z (1970), and have subsequently been developed by other

theorists. I draw here on Catherine Belsey's lucid exposition of the problems in Critical Practice (1980).

Belsey uses the term "expressive realism" to describe the theory that "literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true." [31] This theory emerged as a fusion of the Aristotelian concept of art as mimesis, which was very influential in the eighteenth century, and the Romantic perception of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." At the same time the ideology of capitalism was emphasising the value of individual freedom, freedom of conscience and consumer choice. Belsey suggests that "classic realism" performs the work of ideology,

> not only in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, but also in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding.
>
> . . . The reader is invited to perceive and judge the "truth" of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation. This model of intersubjective communication, of shared understanding of a text which re-presents the world, is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects. [32]

The realist text achieves these ends by means of several formal devices: "illusionism", "closure" and a "hierarchy of discourses". In this hierarchy of discourses it is the narrator's discourse which is privileged, so the reader is able to share in the narrator's interpretation and judgement of the characters and their stories. However, as we noted earlier, one of the ways in which a verbal text can most convincingly relate to reality is by imitating ways of thinking about reality. David Lodge, in an essay on Middlemarch, challenges the straightforward view of a narrator's discourse dominating characters' discourses by pointing to the characteristic use of free indirect

speech in the realist novel of the nineteenth century. Through this device the discourses of narrator and character can be inextricably mixed, as the narrator, "without absenting himself entirely from the text, communicates the narrative to us coloured by the thoughts and feelings of a character." [33] Thus ambiguity and indeterminacy can feature in the nineteenth-century realist novel as well as in the twentieth-century experimental novel. This is still consistent with Belsey's main argument, for she recognises that

> Authors do not inevitably simply reiterate the timeworn patterns of signification. Analysis reveals that at any given moment the categories and laws of the symbolic order are full of contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies which function as a source of possible change. The role of ideology is to suppress these contradictions in the interests of the preservation of the existing social formation, but their presence ensures that it is always possible, with whatever difficulty, to identify them, to recognize ideology for what it is, and to take an active part in transforming it by producing new meanings. 34

Bearing in mind the ever-present potential for change in "the symbolic order" and the capacity of literature to exploit this potential, it seems appropriate now to re-examine my earlier statement about the nineteenth-century tradition of realism continuing today. Whilst it is certainly true that realism is the dominant popular mode in literature, it has not gone unchallenged. The great achievements of the modernist period not only exposed the ideology underlying nineteenth-century fiction, they also effected such far-reaching formal and stylistic changes in the novel that it must have seemed nothing further could be done with the genre. Of course, despite periodic pronouncements about the death of the novel, it has survived and developed, but England in the post-modernist period was no longer where the developments were happening. It seemed to many observers that after the Second World War English novelists retreated from the experimentation of their predecessors and settled back into a stale kind of realism characterised by the

'provincial' or 'angry' novel of the 1950s. However, novelists who choose the realistic mode are not necessarily unaware of the implications of their choice, nor are they necessarily locked into the pretended certainties of the classic realist text. Bernard Bergonzi cites J.G. Farrell as an example of a novelist who combines historical imagination with "reflective realism, aware of the conventionality of fiction, whilst open to the world of experience."[35] Other writers have rejected realism totally: David Caute, in The Illusion (1971), declared: "Realism is burnt-out, obsolete, a tired shadow of a once-living force. It has to go."

In this already pluralistic atmosphere there is another complicating factor, that is, the prominence of other narrative media such as film and television drama. It is precisely because the visual media can accomodate the demands of realism so successfully that the problems of the realist novel have become more apparent. Marshall McLuhan's much-quoted dicta about the impact of new media on old ones are surely relevant here:

> Today, with the cinema and the electric speed-up of information movement, the formal structure of the printed word, as of mechanism in general, stands forth like a branch washed up on the beach. A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them. 36

The last phrase is important. Although the new media have supplanted the old in some areas, and taken over many of their functions, the resulting shake-up has shown that written forms, whether they be novels, histories, documentary writings, or anything else, have more in common with each other than they have with the visual images of the new media. And so a new kind of realism has come to the novel, not the illusionism of the classic realist text, but a claim to authenticity and seriousness based on the revived intimacy between the novel and nonfictional forms of writing.

The new products of this intimacy are various, but those which have

been most studied so far are the developments originating in America in the 1960s. There the older forms of fiction were under pressure not only from new media, but also from more far-reaching cultural changes. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, in The Mythopoeic Reality, argues that the nature of contemporary experience and the mood of continual crisis in the 1960s led to the rapid breaking down of long-held certainties about society, shared values, and the individual psyche; at the same time scientific discoveries were overturning traditional views of "fact" and reality. This widespread sense of disruption, far more sudden than at other periods of history, precipitated a new aesthetic and new forms of writing, of which one of the most significant features was a surrendering of the notion that "a fact is necessarily an embodiment of order, predictability and what used to be known as commonsensical reality."[37] Thus, according to Zavarzadeh, the "supramodernist" writer approaches facts "not to invoke their facade of reality but to enact through his registration their inner turbulence"; in this way s/he becomes "the mythographer of contemporary consciousness."[38] Similar points about the apocalyptic mood of America in the 60s are made by John Hollowell in his study, Fact and Fiction. In addition, Hollowell attributes the reshaping of traditional genres to "a changing relationship between the writer's conception of his role and the production of art in a mass society."[39] Key elements in this new role for the writer are commitment and, often, direct involvement in collective experiences.

Although it is possible to argue that there were precedents for these so-called "new" developments in writing, two distinct kinds became prominent in the 1960s: "New Journalism" and the "nonfiction novel". The first of these terms was used, initially, to describe the work of journalists such as Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin and Gay Talese writing for Esquire and the Herald Tribune's Sunday supplement, New York. They used many of the techniques usually reserved for fiction, such as scene-by-

scene construction and full dialogue, to transform their journalistic articles; at the same time they developed a frankly subjective attitude towards the people and events they described. Tom Wolfe denies that the New Journalism was a "movement": "There were no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a saloon bar where the faithful gathered, since there was no faith and no creed."[40] But it quickly began to have an impact on the literary world and has exerted an important influence on fiction-writers, in America and elsewhere. (A recent British example of the genre is Adam Mars-Jones' "Bathpool Park", an account of the trial of the "Black Panther", Donald Neilson.[41])

The second new development, the nonfiction novel, also links the approaches of the journalist and the novelist. But perhaps it challenges the status of facts more profoundly than New Journalism does, since it retains the novel's emphasis on the author's shaping vision and control over the narrative, at the same time presenting facts as facts, in a purely literal way. One of the best-known exponents of the genre is Truman Capote, who claimed to have invented the term "nonfiction novel"[42] to describe his best-selling book In Cold Blood (1965). The decision to fashion a work in this form was based, he said, on a long-held theory:

> It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the "nonfiction novel", as I thought of it. . . . On the whole, journalism is the most under-estimated, the least explored of literary mediums. [43]

Capote insisted that this new form was not to be confused with the old documentary novel, although many critics have denied his claim of innovation, pointing out a long tradition of true crime stories into which this account of the murdered Clutter family and their killers could be fitted; this tradition includes The Red and the Black and Crime and Punishment, as well as twentieth-century examples such as Dreiser's An American Tragedy and Meyer Levin's Compulsion. However, Capote's well-publicized promotion of this "serious new art form" served to arouse debate about the

possibility of new directions for the novel. The debate was stimulated further by the publication of Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night (1968), whose two-fold structure is revealed in the subtitle: History as a Novel, the Novel as History. The subject-matter of Mailer's book - the 1967 Pentagon march and demonstration against the war in Vietnam - exemplifies the point made earlier about the writer's role as both witness and publicist of serious events or issues in contemporary experience. Even where the writer is not, like Mailer, directly involved in the events described, this role implies a decisive engagement between the writer and the society in which s/he lives.

The nonfiction novel, like New Journalism, has spread beyond its American roots. The growing acceptance of the premises on which it is based can perhaps be illustrated by the case of Schindler's Ark. This work by the Australian Thomas Keneally aroused a mild controversy in this country when, in 1982, it was awarded the Booker McConnell Prize for Fiction. Keneally was already known as a novelist, and although Schindler's Ark is a faithfully-researched story of a little-known hero of World War II, his publisher decided to catalogue the work as fiction. John Carey, the chairman of the Booker judging panel that year, endorsed this decision in terms which recall B.S. Johnson's separation of the terms "novel" and "fiction":

> It seemed to me that the artistic and literary element lies in the structure of the book - in the way in which the author has put together the testimony and evidence he collected and the sequence in which he chooses to release the facts. There is no falsity in the book, but he has made a novel by structuring, placing and ordering . . . 44

Carey's criteria suggest that the novelist, constructing his narrative of real events, is very close to the historian, for whom "structuring, placing and ordering" are also crucial activities. This brings me to the final theme of this chapter, the literary element in historical writing.

When I referred to the historical writing of Gibbon and Macaulay (pp.13-14 above), it was to suggest that they might appear in the syllabus of a university English department because of the quality of the writing and in spite of their nonfictional nature. They are examples of a fairly small number of nonfictional works which have been enshrined in the literary canon, although I doubt whether they are often accorded the same status as "great" poems, drama or novels. The systematization of literary study has emphasized, in various ways, the distinctions between different kinds of writing, and theories of genre which attempt to describe or account for these differences have usually been concerned with poems, drama, novels, and their sub-divisions;[45] other kinds of writing on the fringes of the syllabus receive scant attention in such theories. But amongst the changes being wrought by modern literary theory are an uncovering of the assumptions underlying ideas of literature as a "closed" system and increasing recognition of the open nature of genres. It was the Russian Formalists (notably Yury Tynyanov) who, in the 1920s, first elaborated the idea of genre as a "floating system";[46] and this has proved to be a valuable contribution to contemporary theory. Indeed, recent changes in the form of the novel such as I have been describing can hardly be accommodated in any less flexible approach. However, it is also important to remember that the nonfictional genres, to which literary historians have paid less attention because of their "second division" status, are not immutable either; the concept of "history", which has so often been juxtaposed to "fiction", is itself subject to change, and so is historical writing. It may be helpful to indicate, briefly, how the methods and foci of historical writing have changed, especially during the lifetime of the novel.

The distinction between historical writing and other literary arts only emerged as a problematic issue towards the end of the eighteenth century. Raymond Williams' entry on "History" in Keywords draws

attention to the common root of "history" and "story" and points out that in early English use both terms were applied to "an account either of imaginary events or of events supposed to be true." From the fifteenth century onwards the meaning of "history" related more specifically to past real events and thus to organized knowledge of the past. There is, in addition, the modern sense of "history" as a continuing process, but "historical writing" is usually about events in the past.[47]

In an essay entitled "History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification", Lionel Gossman illustrates the long-standing connection between literature and history by referring to classical writers such as Tacitus, Polybius and Plutarch, who were all concerned with the presentation of narrative and literary technique. This ancient emphasis on the aesthetics of historical writing influenced Renaissance historiographers and their successors. Despite Sidney's remarks in The Defence of Poetry, for most historians writing was viewed as "an art of presentation rather than a scientific enquiry, and its problems belonged therefore to rhetoric rather than to epistemology."[48]

While historiography was perceived and practised as a literary genre throughout the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth, many early novels announced themselves as histories. Of course, some novels at this period proclaimed their affinities with other kinds of writing, such as epic or romance, but it was the claim to realism - the so far unquestioned realism of historical narrative - which proved to be the distinguishing mark of the novel as a developing genre. Because the fictional and non-fictional genres were so closely related, any description of "the rise of the novel" is shot through with problems of definition and classification; here John Richetti comments on the difficulty of separating factual from fictional writing in the pre-Richardson era:

> It is clearly useless to bandy about the old labels and to proliferate truisms, but one is still left with the inescapable root meaning of fiction - a false story, something which never

happened, as opposed to an accurate biography, or travel account, or diary. But if this falsity is accepted as a minimum requirement for the admission of a prose narrative into the history of the novel, the facts uncovered by eighteenth-century scholars complicate matters considerably. Their findings show that many narratives of the period, presented as fact and accepted as such by many, were sheer fabrications. Many "novels" were only thinly disguised romans à clef, gross mixtures of slander and scandal. It is, in short, extremely difficult to separate fact from fiction in a great many of the prose narratives of the period that are customarily called fiction. 49

Interestingly, Richetti's method of dealing with this problem of definition is to insist that "most extended narratives, whatever their origin and exact degree of veracity, become 'fictions' during the process of consumption." This is because they "stimulate to a greater or lesser degree some personal fantasy, some identification with the personages involved in the acts being related."[50] (I shall return to this concept of "audience use" in chapter 2.)

The kind of factual writing discussed by Richetti is, however, very different in character from the great works of eighteenth-century historians. In the overlapping realms of journalism and fiction the narrative emphasis was on the individual character, the singular event; "realistic particularity" (Ian Watt's phrase[51]) was the keynote. But historical narrative at this period, although still concerned above all with literary quality, took a broader view of human experience. To quote again from Lionel Gossman's essay,

> In neo-classical historiography the part is . . . subordinated to the whole, the particular to the general, the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic. . . . History . . . is turned into destiny, and time into the medium in which a timeless order unfolds. 52

Gossman is referring here to the "founding fathers" of modern historiography, Voltaire and Gibbon. Both these writers aspired to make history the modern successor of the epic, and indeed they achieved literary as well as intellectual success through the skilful narrative organization and stylistic elegance of their works. But what is just as remarkable about the work of Gibbon and Voltaire is the new emphasis on interpreta-

tion so that historical writing becomes a medium for the analysis of human civilization and its development. In The Nature of History Arthur Marwick points out that this new breadth of approach is also a characteristic of the great eighteenth-century Scottish school of historiography. He includes in this school not only historians such as William Robertson and John Millar, but writers who have now been claimed by other scholarly disciplines, David Hume and Adam Smith. So besides the overlap between history and literature, history merged, at other points, into philosophy and economics. This was possible in the eighteenth century because "the lines delimiting history were still not firmly drawn."[53] But towards the end of the century what had been a homogeneous republic of letters began to break up, and history became, in the nineteenth century, a specialized discipline whose practitioners "withdrew more and more to the university."[54] However, as Gossman shows, the split between literature and history which began at the end of the eighteenth century was also accelerated by other factors.

One important change concerned the conception of literature itself.

> The term "literature" gradually became more closely associated with poetry, or at least with poetic and figurative writing, and, especially among the Romantics and their successors, took on the meaning of a corpus of privileged or sacred texts, a treasury in which value, truth, and beauty had been piously stored, and which could be opposed to the empirical world of historical reality and even, to some extent, to historiography as the faithful record of that reality. 55

The second of the eighteenth-century changes which helped to put a distance between literature and history was epistemological. Up till this point the possibility of impartial narrative which accurately represented real (past) events had not been seriously questioned. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century the problem of historical objectivity began to be debated, especially in Germany, as historians sought for a theory of historical knowledge which would accommodate and subsume the newly-recognized subjective element in

historical writing. An early statement on the importance of this subjective element is quoted in Gossman's article. It comes from a German theologian, Johann Martin Chladenius, writing in 1752, who recognized that each of us looks at any given "story" from our own point of view and therefore, in retelling it, the point of view becomes part of the story:

> "A narration wholly abstracted from its own point of view is impossible, and hence an impartial narration cannot be called one that narrates without any point of view at all, for such simply is not possible." 56

Chladenius' solution to this problem of objectivity - a narration which combines a number of different points of view - has in fact been used by novelists rather than historians. But as far as the development of historical writing is concerned, the important point to note is the developing awareness that, in historical narrative, naive realism was no longer enough.

The emphasis in nineteenth-century scholarship generally on facts and scientific accuracy thus showed itself, in the new discipline of history, in a concern with problems of epistemology and methodology. The philosophies of history advanced by figures such as Ranke, Comte and Marx were different in character, but all were concerned with the question of <u>how</u> we establish knowledge about the past, and not so much with the manner in which that knowledge is conveyed. (Marx, however, did recognize that since history is about continuous processes, involving the present as well as the past, the written record itself could provide evidence - often unwitting - of social processes at work.) The development of nineteenth-century historical studies, especially in Germany, thus involved a search for a rationale which would establish history's relation to (or difference from) the natural sciences rather than literature. This did not mean, however, that the writers of history were no longer alive to the importance of the literary element in their work,

and indeed for British and American historians in the mid-nineteenth century the "literary approach" was still dominant. Thomas Babington Macaulay, with his History of England, provides one of the best-known illustrations of history as a literary art; Macaulay aimed to outwrite the novelists of the 1840s by producing "something which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies."[57]

Some of Macaulay's most famous American contemporaries, George Bancroft, Francis Parkman, William H. Prescott and John Motley, also saw themselves primarily as "men of letters". David Levin's study of these four figures, History as Romantic Art (1959), points out that "although their names dominated American historical writing for fifty years, every one of these men had established a place in the New England literary community before he wrote a word of history."[58] Levin goes on to show the relationship between these writers' historical methods and the literary and intellectual romanticism of their time.

Levin's book was one of the first to offer a literary analysis of historical writing. In the Preface he sets out the convictions underlying his approach to historiography:

> I believe that the writing of history is a literary art, and that history is one of the most difficult of literary forms. However "scientific" the historian's preoccupations or research, he must eventually select the evidence that merits preservation in his work, and any principle of selection implies at least the quest for a coherent order, the choice of one or two major themes. If he believes that individual experience affects the development of history, he must find some convincing way of portraying human character, and he cannot avoid some evaluation of character. He must also arrange the events so that those which he considers most important appear to be the most important, while his narrative reveals a coherent relationship among events, between action and character, between particular fact and general principle. 59

The influence of Levin's work can be seen in some later studies of American historians[60] but a more recent analyst of the poetics of history, Hayden White, has reached a still wider audience with his often controversial work.

In his book Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-

Century Europe (1973), and in numerous other essays, White explores the implications of the historian's search for form. White goes further than Levin in challenging the scientific basis of history, but his challenge rests on a similar conception of historical narratives as "verbal fiction, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences."[61] He suggests that the historiographer's choice of starting and finishing points, his selection of facts and the degree of emphasis placed on those facts will often depend on the informing mode of the whole work, which may be (in Northrop Frye's categories) tragic, comic, romantic or ironic. Most historical sequences can be shaped into different kinds of stories, and so, for example, "what Michelet in his great history of the French Revolution construed as a drama of Romantic transcendence, his contemporary Tocqueville emplotted as ironic tragedy."[62] Along with the idea of "emplotment" go other narrative techniques concerning characterization, tonal variations and descriptive strategies, which are more usually associated with the novelist's craft. But the most important feature of the historian's use of familiar plot-structures is that they enable the reader to make sense of an unfamiliar complex of past events.

Another significant strand in White's argument concerns the nature of the sources from which the historian constructs his view of the past. The documents which are his primary sources are themselves verbal artefacts whose correspondence with actuality is subject to all the usual provisos concerning language as a signifying system. Additionally, the historian's view of the context, the "historical milieu" of those documents, is filtered through the lens of previous historical narratives:

> Each new historical work only adds to the number of possible texts that have to be interpreted if a full and accurate picture of a given historical milieu is to be faithfully drawn.

> The relationship between the past to be analyzed and historical works produced by analysis of the documents is paradoxical; the more we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize about it. 63

So whereas the physical sciences can progress by revolutionary breakthroughs which negate or disconfirm previous concepts and theories, history, like literature, "progresses by the production of classics . . . There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this non-negatable element is its form . . ."[64]

Hayden White's challenge to the scientific basis of history has received widespread attention partly because, as an intellectual historian much influenced by literary theorists, his breadth of approach makes his work accessible to philosophers and literary critics as well as historians. The impact of his work can also be related to its timeliness: the historical profession has undergone enormous changes since the early years of this century, and many of these changes are still in the process of being worked through. In the nineteenth century, to regard history as a literary art (and White points out that, despite Ranke, several major theorists - Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche and Croce - viewed history this way) was not to question the status of historical interpretation, since the "belief that poetry was a form of knowledge, indeed the basis of all knowledge" was still widely accepted. Today, however, poetic insights are regarded as being essentially different from scientific insights, hence the urgency with which history's claim to scientific status has been defended.[65] One of the most important developments in the search for a twentieth-century science of history has been the growth of the "Annales school", originally led by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who founded the journal Annales in 1929.

Annales history, sometimes called "new history" and no longer confined to France, is essentially social history which has moved away from the event-oriented political narratives characteristic of much

historical scholarship. David Hackett Fischer summarizes the differences between the old and new history thus:

> First, and most fundamentally, [new history] isn't really about the past at all, but rather about change - with past and present in a mutual perspective. Second, it isn't a story-telling but a problem-solving discipline. Third, its problems are not primarily about power, but rather they are about major patterns of change and continuity in the ordinary acts and thoughts of ordinary people - people in the midst of others - people in society. 66

New history, then, involves the use of new source materials, including quantifiable data such as demographic statistics, and new methods of handling them, including mathematical approaches (the language of mathematics being used "not merely for a quantitative purpose, but also as a calculus of conceptual relationships"[67]). In 1968 one of the chief propagandists of the new history, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, prophesied that by the 1980s "the historian will be a programmer or he will be nothing."[68] Although there are econometric historians who call themselves "cliometricians" (members, as Fischer points out, of "the only metric discipline which requests the services of a muse"[69]), they are a small group, and the grim threat of computer-written history seems to have receded. Certainly Le Roy Ladurie's own work, especially the best-selling Montaillou (1978), shows a concern with shapely narrative, even if the underlying organization is thematic rather than chronological. Narrative and analysis can be combined in many different ways, and the new social histories demonstrate a variety of approaches which satisfy both empirical and aesthetic requirements. For example, Fischer's study of Marc Bloch's Feudal Society (1964) reveals that within the separate narrative motifs of the two volumes, there are numerous simultaneous narratives (67 in volume I alone) which produce an overall effect of unity as well as complexity. So even where historians think of their work as a problem-solving discipline, "the solutions to their problems commonly take a complex narrative form, in which many story-lines are braided together by dichotomy, dialectic, paradox or problem-chain."[70]

The forms of historical writing, then, have changed considerably since the eighteenth century, as has the discipline of history itself. The new social history's emphasis on "ordinary people . . . people in society" has involved a blurring of the boundaries between history and other social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology. This is, of course, not the only new development in historiography, but it is one of the most significant.[71] Similarly, in the field of fiction, there are choices to be made between diverse and radically opposed modes, but I have focused on those developments which link fiction with contemporary history and nonfictional forms of writing, thus renewing a vital sense of purpose and relevance for the novel. The combined impact of current developments in historiography and developments in the novel makes distinctions between fictional and nonfictional writing harder to discern and, in some cases, beside the point. For the practical purposes of living, most of us continue to differentiate between what happens in the world "out there" and what happens in the imagination, but as far as the written record is concerned, E.L. Doctorow surely caught the contemporary mood with his famous declaration in 1975: "There is no more fiction or nonfiction - only narrative."[72]

CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVE AND THE READER

Substituting the term "narrative" for either "fiction" or "nonfiction" achieves more than just shelving the intractable problems of definition discussed in chapter 1. It is also likely to alter our perception of the literary text so that we see it in terms of a process as well as a finished product. Narrative may, of course, take many other forms besides literary ones, but the study of any kind of narration begins from the obvious point that it is a communication process involving, on one axis an addresser (narrator), a message (narrative) and an addressee (narratee); the other axis consists of a context, a code and a channel or contact.[1] There are possible objections to this application of a communication model to a literary text (see, for example, R.A. Sharpe's essay, "The Private Reader and the Listening Public"[2]) but they seem to hinge around the idea of "meaning" being inherent in the "message" which originates with the writer. However, if we take a line from behavioural psychologists and regard communication not so much in terms of messages with meanings and more in terms of stimulus and response, the problem of meaning becomes more manageable. Thus Colin Cherry, in On Human Communication, can propose that "communication . . . is essentially the relationship set up by the transmission of stimuli and the evocation of responses."[3] This activity still involves meaning-production, but Cherry's emphasis on a "sharing of rules" and "the generation of meaning through culturally produced patterns"[4] can very usefully be applied to literary structures, as we shall see.

The simplest version of the communication model involves one-directional transmission along the horizontal axis from the addresser, via the message, to the addressee. The addressee's, or in this case, reader's immediate role is restricted to that of consumer; less directly, the reader may be helping to shape the market forces which affect the

production of further works (part of the "context" in this model) and very occasionally, as in the case of some of Dickens' serialized novels, for example, there may by a kind of circular interaction affecting the production of a given text. But on the whole the "transmission" model provides a limited and largely passive role for the reader. However, the communication model can also accommodate a more complex dynamic flow in which readers are assigned roles as producers of texts and sources of meaning. In this potentially anarchic situation, the "sharing of rules" and the operation of "culturally produced patterns" noted by Cherry prevent the dynamic process from disintegrating in confusion. The actual reading of a literary text becomes, in this model, a far more complex activity, and over the last two decades much critical energy has gone into analyzing it. The purpose of this chapter is to chart some of the major developments in this field of inquiry, and to generate further questions about the reading process which will be addressed in the main body of the thesis.

The story of the changing focus of literary studies is now a familiar one. The reader's role, for so long unexplored, has become a centre of critical interest amongst the rapid changes and upheavals in literary studies. But perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to an expanding or multiple focus, since although at the more specialized level new theories of literary communication are developed with almost bewildering frequency, older approaches are not wholly without influence, even if their prestige has diminished. Thus the biographical and historical interest in authors and their periods which characterized nineteenth-century literary studies is still prominent at the "introductory" level of literary education and beyond, whilst the text-centred assumptions of Anglo-American New Criticism continue to exercise a decisive influence on much teaching of literature. The impact of structuralism and post-

structuralism has certainly not obliterated "old criticism"; David Lodge noted, in Working with Structuralism (1981), that there were "still strongholds of dissent and resistance" and academics who were prepared to "man the periodical ramparts in defence of empiricism, humanism, the New Criticism or whatever."[5] More recently, Lodge has felt impelled to man these ramparts himself in defence of the author, whom post-structuralist critics, in their attempts to unsettle old ideas of authority and meaning in literary texts, have sometimes consigned to oblivion.[6] Barthes' characteristically dramatic statement, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author"[7] is one of the slogans of a radical decentring programme which has totally altered our view of literary texts. But even if Barthes' verdict on authors is extreme, his recognition of the reader's ascendancy does reflect a major change in the literary critical landscape.

The range of reader-centred theories is wide. Some have arisen out of New Criticism's concentration on texts and their effects; others take as their starting-point the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl and his successors; whilst still newer variants have emerged in the wake of structuralism. Except for those West German critics, many of them associated with the University of Constance, who muster under the "reception theory" flag, the exponents of reader-centred theories do not constitute a "school" of criticism, and in fact the theoretical positions from which they begin are extremely varied, even disparate. As Robert Holub points out, this is because the "reader-response" label

> has been applied ex post facto to a number of writers who have had very little contact with or influence on each other. . . . If reader-response criticism has become a critical force, as some would maintain, it is by virtue of the ingenuity of the labeling rather than any commonality of effort. 8

But there is one critic whose work appears to be influential both among reception theorists and reader-response theorists of various persuasions - Wolfgang Iser. Although his opponents would cite such adaptability as

evidence of innate contradictions in his theory, his work has helped to introduce important aspects of European theory to the English-speaking world, and it has also served to stimulate discussion about what actually happens when readers meet texts.

Iser presents the reading process as a dynamic activity in which text and reader interact to produce the literary work:

> The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader - though this is in turn acted upon by the different patterns of the text. 9

The text's "gaps" or "indeterminacies" which invite the creative play of the reader's imagination are still, in Iser's theory, limited and held in place by the formal properties of the written text. Thus, whilst individual readers may produce individual readings, these readings are not arbitrary; for Iser, every possible reading is inherent in the text's "intention" and "the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations." [10] But at the same time as the reader is "realizing" the text, the text is acting upon the reader. In the process of making selective decisions which will bring consistency to the open, unfolding text, the reader leaves behind his or her own preconceptions; this in turn opens the way for new experience ("of the unfamiliar world of the literary text"[11]) and fuller self-knowledge. Iser's theory of reading thus makes moral claims about the value of reading as well as attempting to describe the process of reading.

However, Iser's reader is not an actual but an implied reader who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effects."[12] In opting for the concept of an implied reader Iser tries to avoid the difficulties presented, on the one hand, by empirical readers (who impose a complexity of historical, sociological and outright idiosyncratic limitations on interpretation) and on the other hand by abstractions such as Michael Riffaterre's "super-

reader" who is no longer even an "implied" person but a tool of analysis composed of many different parts (including the author of whichever text is under discussion). Even so, the concept of an implied reader carries its own problems, and some of the criticisms of Iser's theory are directed at the haziness of the term. In the end, Iser's view of the reading process relies on a reader who is already, like the text, partly pre-determined. Again, Robert Holub sums this up:

> Throughout The Act of Reading we encounter a competent and cultured reader who, contrary to Iser's wishes, is predetermined in both character and historical situation. This reader must be attuned to the social and literary norms of the day. In the eighteenth century he/she must have a good command of, say, Lockean philosophy, while in the twentieth century he/she should, like Iser, favor works of the traditional avant-garde. . . .
>
> The reader promoted by Iser should also be a paradigm of "liberalism". In fact, unless he/she endeavours to rid him/herself of ideological "biases", a correct reading of the text will be precluded . . . 13

The second of these criticisms seems to me well-justified. It is only an open-minded reader who will, in the first place, enter into the kind of process which Iser's theory demands; the reader then emerges from the activity with his/her enlightened tolerance reinforced. However, it is Holub's first point, about the reader's competence, which I want to take up now, with reference to Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics.

Where Iser takes for granted the fact that his implied reader will be "attuned to the . . . literary norms of the day", Culler brings out into the open the influence of literary competence:

> To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a tabula rasa and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for. 14

Thus Culler foregrounds the conventions of literary tradition which shape the writing as well as the reading of literature:

> To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of the genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place. 15

However, the concept of "literary competence" has come to be associated, in Structuralist Poetics and subsequently, with the reader rather than the writer. Culler concentrates on the interpretive operations performed by readers because these are easier to observe and experiment with than the conventions assumed by authors. Drawing on Noam Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence, Culler argues for a "grammar" of literary competence which "readers have assimilated but of which they may not consciously be aware."[16] The critic's task, then, is to make the implicit explicit and describe the conventions which enable readers to go beyond the transparent linguistic surface of the literary text to interpretation. In chapter 6 of Structuralist Poetics Culler takes as his example Blake's poem "Ah, Sun-Flower" and posits four principles which govern a "competent" reader's interpretation. These are the "rule of significance" (which in this case gives the sunflower the value of an emblem); the convention of metaphorical coherence, which is helped along by the convention of poetic tradition; and finally the convention of thematic unity. These conventions are also relevant, in varying degrees, to the reading of prose fiction. Culler's chapter on "Poetics of the Novel" demonstrates the importance of theme and symbol as well as discussing the narrative contracts set up between novels and their readers.

Culler's concept of literary competence, like Iser's phenomenological analysis of the reading process, has proved to be a most valuable addition to the repertoire of reader-response criticism. It gives expression and theoretical coherence to what were hitherto rather vague, scattered hints about important features of the context of literary communication. One can think of these conventions for reading literature as being like a special pair of spectacles: when the reader has them on, even an ordinary piece of journalistic prose is transformed (Culler cites Genette's Figures II, pp.150-1, for an example of this trans-

formation in action). And furthermore the interpretations yielded by this means are not subjective, but public. Anyone wearing "literary competence" spectacles will "see" texts in a similar way and be able to discuss what they see. This metaphor helps to illustrate a basic dissimilarity, though, between Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence and Culler's literary competence. Chomsky argued that linguistic competence is innate, that the human mind contains structures specific to language which actually determine the various forms of human languages. Of course this argument can be and has been challenged, but one cannot even begin to argue that literary competence is innate; responses to literature have to be learned, and this is no more a "natural" process than is the adjustment of human vision through the use of spectacles. Eugene Kintgen, in The Perception of Poetry, argues that Culler's analogy with linguistics is misleading for several reasons: the concept of competence means different things in the field of linguistics and in the field of literature; Culler's use of the concept was in any case based on the early "standard theory" which has since been found wanting; and perhaps most importantly,

> a linguistic theory designed specifically to account for the ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech-community is hardly likely to be useful in explaining the variety of interpretation Culler finds "the single most salient and puzzling fact about literature." 17

But even if Culler's aim of explicating interpretation according to an internalized system of rules is based on a false analogy, this does not render the concept of literary competence useless. It may not be able to account successfully for the range of potential meanings in a text, but it does help to focus attention on the institutions which teach readers to read (and interpret) and which thus shape their responses to texts. We shall return to this point shortly, in discussing the work of Stanley Fish, but first I want to refer briefly to some points in Culler's work which have a bearing on the earlier discussion of literary narrative

as communication.

In the communication model outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the code, context and channel axis is just as important as the writer, text, reader axis. The channel (or contact) involved in literary communication is, in Jakobson's words, "both a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee";[18] since this is an element which relates to individual encounters with texts, I shall make further reference to it in chapter 4, when specific reading experiences are described. But "code" and "context" can be discussed more generally, and although the terms denote distinct features of the communication model, in the case of literary communication I believe they are closely linked.

The importance of context in approaches to literary works has been indicated in the extracts from Structuralist Poetics quoted above (p.47). In his more recent books, The Pursuit of Signs (1981) and On Deconstruction (1983), Culler dwells increasingly on the structuralist concept of "intertexuality", originally formulated by Julia Kristeva (Semiotike, 1969). "Intertextuality", with its reference to the reader's experience of prior texts, signifies more precisely than "context" the role of conventions in shaping readers' approaches to texts. Culler points out that "intertextuality" has a double focus:

> On the one hand, it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion, and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written. Yet in so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, "intertextuality" leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification. 19

The recognition of literary works as intertextual constructs is in part, then, a product of that pursuit of codes which has characterized so much structuralist writing. In communication theory the term "code" has a definite technical meaning, "an agreed transformation, usually one to one and reversible, by which messages may be converted from one set of

signs to another."[20] But in literary theory codes are more open categories whose function is to identify and classify different elements in a text; thus their nature and number will vary according to the kind of text under discussion and the perspective adopted. The five codes isolated by Barthes in S/Z have subsequently been subdivided, and as Culler reminds us in On Deconstruction, Barthes' list omits the important code of narration, "extensively studied in other contributions to poetics."[21]

Although I agree with Culler's complaint that, in general, an approach to texts through codes tends to turn the reader from being a person to a mere function ("the destinataire or place where the codes on which the unity and intelligibility of the text depends are said to be inscribed"[22]), studies of the narrative code in operation are more likely to present the reader positively, as a participant in a narrative transaction. We might note here the possible sub-divisions of "reader": besides the actual reader who exists independently of the text, and Iser's "implied reader" who is a theoretical construct encoded in the text, narrative texts also imply a narratee who is sometimes, though by no means always, identified with the implied reader. Gerald Prince's "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee" describes various types of narratee and their functions, one of which is to act as a "relay between the narrator and the reader."[23] Mediation may be direct, in the form of explicit addresses or asides, or indirect, involving apparently shared references, values, ways of thinking. A further distinction is introduced by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, a distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narratees according to whether or not they are also characters in the narrative. A text may include both types of narratee, but the extradiegetic narratee

> is granted reliability, without which his status as distinct

> from the real reader would be meaningless. Intradiegetic narratees, on the other hand, can be unreliable, and hence the butt of the irony shared by the implied author and reader. 24

Studies of the narrative code focusing on the narratee thus emphasize the closeness of the relationships between the participants in narrative communication: the "real author" and "real reader" at each end of the chain are linked by implied author, narrator, narratee and implied reader. On this basis, interpretations of literary works cannot avoid taking into account the operations of readers and the part played by readers in the narrative act.

Amongst those theorists who have taken this attention to readers a stage further and proposed that the reader, not the text, is the true object of critical attention, one of the most prominent is Stanley Fish. Despite the meticulous attention to textual detail which characterizes his analyses of literary works, Fish argues that "the objectivity of the text is an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing."[25] In fact he views literature as a kinetic art which can only be actualized by the reader. In one of his earliest works, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost", Fish assigns the reader a central role in the production of meaning, even though that meaning has already been determined by Milton's intentions as a devotional writer. Fish suggests that Milton's method is to "re-create in the mind of the reader (which is, finally, the poem's scene) the drama of the Fall, to make him fall again exactly as Adam did . . ."[26] Fish as reader/critic analysing this method is thus involved in recovering the temporal experience of reading, the moment-by-moment development of responses. Jane Tompkins describes Fish's work as involving "a re-definition of meaning and of literature itself":

> Meaning, according to Fish, is not something one extracts from a poem, like a nut from its shell, but an experience one has in the course of reading. Literature, as a consequence, is not

> regarded as a fixed object of attention but as a sequence of events that unfold within the reader's mind. Correspondingly, the goal of literary criticism becomes the faithful description of the activity of reading, an activity that is minute, complicated, strenuous, and never the same from one reading to the next. 27

In his later work Fish recognizes the contradictions inherent in an approach which made the text "responsible for the activities of its readers" and at the same time tended to give those activities "a larger and larger role to the extent that at times the very existence of the text was called into question."[28] He resolves this dilemma by finding another agency to displace both text and reader as centres of authority; the reader's interpretive strategies, Fish says,

> are not his in the sense that would make him an independent agent. Rather they proceed not from him but from the interpretive community of which he is a member; they are, in effect, community property, and insofar as they at once enable and limit the operations of his consciousness, he is too. . . . Indeed, it is interpretive communities rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. 29

The notion of interpretive communities allows Fish to refute the charge of solipsism which reader-centred theories easily attract, because he can argue that any act of interpretation takes place in a context of communal and conventional norms. By foregoing the possibility of determinate meaning derived from the text, he is not necessarily opening the door to the anarchy of what he disarmingly calls "off-the-wall" interpretations:

> in the event that a fringe or off-the-wall interpretation makes its way into the centre, it will merely take its place in a new realignment in which <u>other</u> interpretations will occupy the position of being off-the-wall. That is, off-the-wallness is not a property of interpretations that have been judged inaccurate with respect to a free-standing text but a property of an interpretive system within whose confines the text is continually being established and re-established. It is not a pure but a relational category; an off-the-wall interpretation is simply one that exists in a reciprocally defining relationship with interpretations that are on the wall. 30

So Fish attributes stability and continuity in the sphere of literary

criticism not to any particular interpretive tradition but to the existence of literary communities within which a variety of interpretations co-exist. Thus the literary competence of the "informed reader" (to use Fish's earlier key term) is a function of the current collective norms of interpretive communities.

I want to make one further point about interpretive conventions which will link this account of Stanley Fish's recent work with the discussion, in chapter 1, about the problems of distinguishing between fictional and nonfictional narratives. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in On the Margins of Discourse, suggests that there is an absolute distinction between "natural discourse" (that is, all utterances "that are understood to be the verbal acts of particular persons on, and in response to particular occasions") and fictive discourse, but that this distinction is a matter of convention:

> the classification of any particular verbal composition as natural or fictive has meaning and consequence only insofar as those concerned with it share certain assumptions regarding how it is to be identified and interpreted, how it is to be taken.
>
> Since the conventions in question here must be learned, it may happen that they are imperfectly mastered or, on some occasion, improperly used or inadequately signaled. Consequently, the appropriate classification of a given composition may be mistaken or doubtful. . . . Moreover, since these conventions are conventions, they may, like the rules of a game, be switched by the agreement of all the players - in this case usually a tacit agreement signaled in various ways - and what is properly taken to be a natural utterance on one occasion may, with equal propriety, be taken as fictive on another, or vice versa. 31

Smith's approach, then, draws attention to the collaborative nature of the assumptions and conventions by which we identify fictional discourse, as well as the flexibility of such conventions. Applying this to the model of narrative communication described earlier, we can see that "context" needs to embrace all the other elements, including author and reader, since it is this tacitly-negotiated context which determines how the specific codes and conventions of interpretive communities operate.

As far as the actual reading of narratives is concerned, then, one of

the key points arising from the theoretical approaches I have discussed so far is that reading is a dynamic process, governed by an awareness of literary conventions which are largely institutionalized and learned. We have also seen that the negotiation of the text by the reader involves more than de-coding; the term "response" in this context includes the reader's active and creative participation in the production of meaning. Another term which needs glossing is "reader", since this can be some kind of implied reader, as in Iser's theory, the critic himself as reader (the position adopted by Fish) or actual readers. As I suggested on p.46, actual readers are far more problematic to deal with than implied readers or reader-critics, but studies based on actual readers have, I think, a double value. Most obviously, they provide an empirical testing-ground for aspects of theory (and this is of particular interest to those who teach literature and are involved with actual readers); in addition, they can link literary studies with other disciplines in which knowledge progresses by means of empirical inquiry. The attempt to objectify literary study and set it on a scientific footing can be seen, for example, in the work of Norbert Groeben, who has conducted large-scale reader surveys and analysed their results statistically.[32] However, this is not the only possible way of finding out what actual readers do with texts. Studies conducted with smaller numbers of readers may lack statistical weight, but they can yield specific insights into individual readings, and these results may in turn stimulate further inquiry. Two such studies which I have found particularly interesting, although very different in their orientations, are those by Norman Holland in 5 Readers Reading and Eugene Kintgen in The Perception of Poetry.

Norman Holland's psychoanalytic approach to reading was first developed in The Dynamics of Literary Response (1968) using the Freudian notion of unconscious fantasy as the basis for readers' responses to a literary text. According to this approach, any text contains a kernel

of fantasy, which is "transformed" during the reading process from the unconscious to the conscious level; the reader's own primitive fantasies are thus obliquely and safely gratified.[33] 5 Readers Reading began as a further investigation of literary response designed to confirm or change the earlier "transformation" model. The central question was: how does the personality of the reader shape the reading experience? Holland's readers were undergraduate students, all English majors, who provided him with data in tape-recorded interviews. (I shall say more about the experimental methods of both Holland and Kintgen in chapter 4, when describing my own informant-based study.) In analysing the interviews, Holland drew on a "dual theory of human motivation: a person seeks pleasure within his identity theme."[34] The pleasure-seeking involves balancing various instincts (the principle of "multiple functions") around a central invariant pattern which is the individual's identity theme. This theory of motivation yielded four principles of literary experience: "Style Seeks Itself"; "Defenses Must Be Matched"; "Fantasy Projects Fantasies"; and "Character Transforms Characteristically." Taken together, these principles assert that "it becomes both useless and impossible to separate the act of reading from the creative personality of the reader."[35] Most teachers of literature could, I imagine, produce numerous classroom examples to endorse this conclusion, although they might not reach it by the psychoanalytic route. However, as an attempt to provide a theoretical model for the study of reading, Holland's argument has its weaknesses: even if the concept of "identity" is as stable as he implies, readers' identity themes can only ever be pursued through the interpreting identity of the analyst, so, as Culler has pointed out,[36] the whole process is circular. The strength of 5 Readers Reading lies, I think, in its awareness of the way reading can and often does depend on the entire personality of the reader (not just on the sociological variables identified by Groeben et al) and in its very

specific and sensitive account of actual readings.

Kintgen's book, The Perception of Poetry, a study of six advanced graduate students reading three poems, conveys a similar sense of real engagements with texts being patiently scrutinized. In almost every other respect Kintgen's work is unlike Holland's. His focus is on a particular variety of reading, the "preaesthetic", which he defines as the kind of reading which "academics undertake to discover information about a poem for presenting their knowledge to other academics."[37] Kintgen's subjects provided him with tapes on which they had attempted to verbalize their thoughts whilst reading. Kintgen then analysed the transcripts in order to classify the different mental operations performed by his readers. His inventory of about two dozen elementary processes is primarily descriptive: for example, "FORM refers to any observation about the poetic form or structure of the poem, such as . . . 'it's a sonnet'."[38] Although many of the categories are straightforward, there are others where, as Kintgen admits, distinctions are not so clear. This is particularly true of the eight operations in his fourth group, and since these are the processes most relevant to my own enquiry, it may be appropriate to look at them in more detail.

The first and simplest of these operations is PARAPHRASE, which often "shades off into DEDUCE, in which the reader tries to ascertain what the poem means rather than what it says, either by filling in the text or by drawing logical conclusions from it."[39] Kintgen then tries to distinguish between deductions based on linguistic knowledge and those based on "knowledge of the world" (DEDUCE: WORLD), the main difficulty here being that practically all world knowledge is encoded linguistically.[40] Further complications arise with the next set of processes in this group, all based on the idea of the reader making connections. CONNECT: POEM is clearly distinguishable from CONNECT: WORLD since the first refers only to connections made within the text,

but "many CONNECT: WORLDs may . . . be strings of DEDUCEs. . . . On the other hand, there are some CONNECT:WORLDs that don't seem to be the results of a series of deductions, but rather of immediately perceived similarity."[41] The third CONNECT process is CONNECT: LITERATURE. Here the reader goes beyond the immediate text and "relates something in the poem to its author, another literary work or to literary history in general."[42] This category has to be fairly elastic since Kintgen wants it to include "any connection a reader made between the poem and anything he had read about. This would include . . . philosophy, religion, social and economic history, politics, and so forth."[43] One can imagine examples in this category which would surely overlap with CONNECT: WORLD, since knowledge used in the latter process must often be derived from reading. Just to stretch the CONNECT: LITERATURE operation further, it includes the earlier operation, FORM, since, for example, "to recognise that a poem is a sonnet is to place it within a literary tradition."[44] However, Kintgen goes on to distinguish between form and other textual elements for his next category, CONNECT: FIGURE; although this operation also depends on literary knowledge, it is related to the previous group of operations which dealt with the linguistic strata of the text: "to identify something as a metaphor is to suggest how to understand it, what the possibilities for paraphrase and deduction are."[45] The last operation in this group, GENERALISE, is rather like the earlier CONNECT: POEM, except that in addition to relating two or more elements in the poem, it specifies what they have in common, often in the form of a summary.

I have dwelt on this part of Kintgen's project because it is here that he attempts to get to the heart of readers' interpretive processes. His approach offers several pointers for further research, and some of the mental operations in his fourth group, in particular, seem equally relevant to an investigation of prose works. As I have suggested, though,

his choice of categories raises a number of problems. A simpler approach may be more workable in practice; a likely contender is the concept of "models of coherence" which embraces the operations in Kintgen's CONNECT group, but offers a more systematic distinction between different types of discourse.

The term "models of coherence", which was originally Culler's, refers to the existing types of discourse with which readers are familiar and through which they make new texts intelligible. The concept is closely related to that of "codes" and "frames" in other theorists, but may be particularly useful in the present study because it can be applied to nonfictional as well as fictional narratives. Rimmon-Kenan gives a broad description of models of coherence as deriving either from "reality" or from literature:

> Reality models help naturalize elements by reference to some concept (or structure) which governs our perception of the world. Such models of coherence can be so familiar that they seem natural and are hardly grasped as models. Chronology and causality belong to this category . . . Literature models do not involve mediation through some concept of the world. Rather they make elements intelligible by reference to specifically literary exigencies or institutions. 46

Even in this simpler scheme, hard and fast distinctions may be difficult to make. For example, our approach to character in a novel may be governed as much by the understanding of human behaviour we have gained from reading other stories as by direct experience or, maybe, knowledge of psychology; the influence of reading (and listening to) stories may be deeper than we think. However, the basic opposition suggested in reality and literature models of coherence, one pointing to the world outside the text, the other to an enclosed literary system, provides a helpful starting-point for further discussion about the reader's orientation.

I mentioned just now that the "models of coherence" concept might be applicable to nonfictional narratives as well as fictional ones.

This is an important consideration, because the various approaches to the study of readers' responses which I have discussed in the course of this chapter are concerned with texts of an unequivocally literary nature: prose fiction, epic or lyric poetry. One of the most instructive features of Iser's work, for example, is the way he traces broad-gauge movements of the reader's viewpoint over long stretches of narrative fiction; other critics have explored in closer focus the line-by-line, phrase-by-phrase decisions and revisions involved especially in the reading of poetry (Fish's work on Milton is a case in point). Holland's study in 5 Readers Reading was based on three short stories: Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (a perennial favourite in the catalogue of applied reader-response criticism), Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams", and Hemingway's "The Battler". Kintgen used a Shakespeare sonnet (another ever-popular subject for readerly critiques), Swinburne's "A Ballad of Dreamland" and Hopkins' "Carrion Comfort". The question arises, how far can theories and techniques developed for the analysis of texts like these be applied to nonfictional narratives such as Naipaul's The Loss of El Dorado? The relationship between historical and fictional narrative may in formal terms be very close, as Hayden White has argued, but it remains to be seen whether readers approach and process such narratives along similar lines.

In chapter 3 I shall draw on some of the work discussed here in order to advance a theory of reading which will take account of nonfictional as well as fictional texts. Among the questions which such a theory will have to address are the following: what kinds of convention are invoked in the reading of fictional and nonfictional narratives? are different kinds of narrative processed in accordance with different models of coherence? does a description of genre predict (as Fish says it does) the shape of response? is the concept of literary competence applicable to the reading of nonfictional texts? and can

such a theory take account of the influence of interpretive communities as well as identifying individual reading practice?

CHAPTER 3: TENSIONS IN READING: A THEORY OF COUNTER-IMPULSES

One of the most salutary points to emerge from a programme of reading in various branches of reader-response criticism is the realization that what readers actually do with texts is infinitely complex and variable. Once the reader is freed from the theoretically passive role of de-coding messages which the author has encoded in the text, we can see that reading is a highly individualized and active process involving a continuous flow of prediction, decision-making and pattern-forming. Often very small decisions about a particular element in the text can, by a kind of butterfly effect, produce major shifts in the reader's orientation. (This is less noticeable amongst "professional" readers who negotiate texts with the assistance of detailed guidelines derived from the interpretive communities they work within, but more noticeable in the studies of "ordinary" readers, from I.A. Richards' work onwards.)

Recognizing the complexity of this process, one is also very aware that any general attempt to describe what happens during reading runs the risk of over-simplification. I have tried to avoid that danger here by using terms such as "tensions" and "impulses" which carry implicit reminders of the tentative, provisional nature of reading. With this caution in mind, I want to propose an approach to the analysis of the reading process which will take account of the differing requirements of fictional and nonfictional narratives, and which will also give due weight to an element in reading often under-estimated: re-reading.

The first move in this theory is to free ourselves from a linear conception of the text. In many ways, of course, the linear dimension of narrative is all-important: from the sentence unit to the overall structure of the narrative, the actual sequence of words matters very much. However, to conceive of the reading process simply as a matter of

following this linear string from point A to point B is to underestimate the vagaries of actual reading and also the effect of re-reading. Starting-points are given, certainly (even if prefaces and prologues complicate the picture) but readings of narrative texts do not always follow a uniform route. On first reading, the reader might back-track over sections of the text, perhaps looking for a missing plot link, checking details of chronology, or comparing a character's actions in chapter 2 with his/her initial presentation in chapter 1. The sheer length of the kinds of texts in question, that is, novels and histories which cannot be read at one sitting, means that readers will have different stopping-places, and the resumption of reading nearly always involves an element of back-tracking, too. Thus even on first reading, each reader chooses slightly different routes by which to traverse the text. For subsequent readings the choice is very wide. A reader whose interest has been aroused by theme X in a novel will pick out and pause over elements in the text scarcely noticed by a reader who is pursuing theme Y. Similarly, a reader of history who is searching for parallels between the set of events narrated in the given text and contemporary developments in other places will be on a rather different journey from that of the reader who wants to know how this set of events might have contributed to later events in the same place. So although the words on the page follow an unchanging sequence, the re-creation of the literary text in the reader's mind takes different shapes on different occasions, and with individual variations between readers.

I shall return shortly to the relationship between re-reading and interpretation. For the present I want to emphasize the constraints implicit in a linear notion of narratives when it comes to analysing the reading process, and to propose an alternative way of imaging the text. An important element in the kinds of narrative under discussion

is their aesthetic unity, involving subtle inter-relationships between different components of the text, so clearly a multi-dimensional concept will be the most appropriate, and will also reflect the answering layers of creative activity which the text triggers in the reader's mind. But it also seems to me important that any alternative notion of the text should preserve the idea of progression and movement embedded in the linear approach. I suggest, then, that we envisage narrative texts not as long strings of sentences which the reader follows from point A to point Z but as having a complex molecular structure in which the various possibilities for meaning and effect interact with each other - spheres rather than strings. The reading encounter sets the sphere in motion, and although the reader is actively making decisions during reading and to a large extent directing the flow of energies involved, once the text is in motion it also begins to exert its own kinetic effect. The dynamic of the text can be either inward towards its centre - a centripetal tendency - or an opposite, centrifugal movement. These opposing tendencies correspond to the differing orientations readers adopt towards fictional and nonfictional narratives. Although such narratives may be formally very close, I noted in chapter 1 (p.16) that as readers we approach the relationship between words and their referents quite differently according to our perception of the text as fictional or nonfictional. Thus, having decided that a particular text is fictional, the reader tends to allow more play to the centripetal impulse which privileges the autonomous, self-authenticating world of the text and its aesthetic possibilities. To read a work as nonfiction, on the other hand, is to emphasize the centrifugal impulse which allows connections to be made between this text and the "real" world, including, of course, other texts and documents.

The idea of viewing texts in terms of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies is not in itself new. Allan Rodway's essay, "Generic

Criticism" in Contemporary Criticism (1970) uses these terms to distinguish between "metacriticism" and "intrinsic criticism":

> The one is concerned with a work's relationships, the other with its identity; the one with its significance, the other with its meaning. In short, one moves outwards from the work, the other inwards to it. Both may use the "background" material of diligent scholarship; it is how they use it that marks the distinction. Is the material being used to further a process of understanding and appreciating the work itself, inwardly but not eccentrically? If so, the approach is strictly literary and intrinsic. Is it, on the other hand, being used to further a process of understanding and appreciating some other topic through literature? Then the approach is metacritical. 1

Rodway's focus is rather different from mine, but it was after extending this basic idea to the reading process that I came across Zavarzadeh's book on the nonfiction novel in which he describes the distinctive quality of this type of narrative as being "simultaneously self-referential and out-referential"; critical assumptions about the non-fictional novel have to deal with "the tension created by the centri-fugal energy of the external reality and the centripetal force of the internal shape of the narrative."[2] Because Zavarzadeh's main concern here is to point up the inadequacy of current theories of prose narrative, the promising idea of tensions between centrifugal and centripetal energies is not developed very much further. However, I think it can be argued that the two tendencies co-exist not only in nonfiction novels but in novels and histories generally. If this is so, it helps to account not only for the special difficulties of reading "between the genres" but also for the possibility of eccentric readings of texts which are generically less ambiguous. Thus, depending on the predilections of the reader, fiction can be read as history, and history as fiction. Most readers, however, will follow the signposts of generic convention in allowing one or other tendency to dominate.

Given that the relationship between novels and histories can be, as Hayden White argues, very close, how then do readers decide on the kind of reading which is most appropriate, and how does the concept of

literary competence figure in the actual play of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies? To discuss this in more detail, we need to separate out some key elements in the narrative text's molecular structure: plot, character, theme and symbol.

The most basic elements of both novels and histories are plot and character. The plot of a novel shares with the plot of historical narrative the requirement that the reader should be able to follow it. The competent reader can then match each new plot s/he encounters against an existing repertoire of plots and at the same time measure originality, grasping the twists and unusual developments which might make the new plot different from those encountered before. Following a plot involves being able to make predictions about events and their outcomes. The reader's pleasure derives sometimes from expectations being confirmed, perhaps in a surprising way, and sometimes from the recognition of alternative possibilities which supersede the original predictions. Even where a novel has very little in the way of plot (for example, Woolf's Mrs Dalloway) initial reading proceeds with the expectation that this level of narrative might still turn out to be important. Indeed, one of the things which drives a reader on through an opaque text is the habit of making predictions at the level of plot (will Peter Walsh's return precipitate a change in Clarissa Dalloway's life? will she actually meet Septimus Warren Smith?) even if they have later to be discarded. Similarly, the plots of historical writing involve in the reader a sense of anticipation, a desire to see the outcome of events. The reading of history inevitably involves a keen awareness of chronology, even at the simple level of following a succession of events, but the reader's pleasure also derives from a more abstract problem in having a problem resolved, a puzzle explained. It is this explanatory effect which helps to define "historical writing" and distinguishes it from "chronicle". Hayden White suggests

that "stories are made out of chronicles by an operation that I have . . . called 'emplotment'. By emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicles as components of specific kinds of plot-structures."[3] White's discussion of emplotment also brings out the idea that knowledge of plot-structures is shared knowledge in which writers and readers occupy common ground:

> What the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the types of configuration of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which he is writing. 4

So reading for plot is a fundamental operation not only for the novel-reader but also for the reader of historical narrative, which indicates that similar kinds of literary competence are involved. "Classical" histories, particularly those which observe a traditional approach to chronology, may well present to the reader satisfying and recognizable structures. However, twentieth-century histories, like twentieth-century novels, may sometimes frustrate conventional expectations. As early as 1922 Lucien Febvre was calling for

> a historiography which, instead of being located in a supposedly even and objective time-flow (and thereby in fact positing such a time-flow), would select moments of crisis, collision and breakdown. Discontinuity, in short, rather than continuity, was to be placed at the heart of history as it had been placed already at the heart of fiction. 5

Naipaul's history of Trinidad, The Loss of El Dorado, is, I suggest, such a text, matching the emerging "modernism" of his novels after A House for Mr Biswas. The significant point for readers, though, is that skills which have been acquired mainly through the processing of conventional narratives may be stretched and challenged by newer narrative approaches which expose the constraints as well as the possibilities of plot-structures. This seems to apply equally to novels and histories.

The second basic element of both types of narrative is character - perhaps the closest area of correspondence between fictional and

historical narratives. Indeed, some historical personae may appear in novels as well as histories, under their own or fictitious names. But the real merging of interpretive operations derives from the fact that in reading for character, whether "real" or "invented", we invoke models of coherence which, as I suggested at the end of chapter 2, are shaped partly by reality and partly by literature. Our everyday experience of people, and perhaps a more academic understanding of psychology, provide one kind of yardstick against which individual characters can be measured. Even in novels which present us with a cast of grotesques or caricatures, we decide whether or not characters are "convincing", usually looking for a degree of consistency which satisfies our reality models of human behaviour. But as Jonathan Culler points out, we "should not underestimate the extent to which [notions of character] are literary conventions."[6] Literary stereotypes provide elementary models of coherence (for example, the hero, the outsider, the seer) which must be as deeply embedded in our perceptions as are plot-structures. In fact, stereotypical roles can only be assigned within the context of plot (our expectations of a hero, for example, are that he will perform certain kinds of <u>actions</u>) so in reading for plot one is also, inevitably, reading for character. Thus, for example, an historical narrative plotted as a story of triumphant conquest will usually involve a hero figure who is either a great warrior or strategist. Of course, novels and histories can and do play against such conventional expectations; here again the reader may find existing interpretive skills challenged and pushed in new directions. But since these skills are grounded in a tangled footing of real-life and literary experience, there would seem to be no way of distinguishing the competent reader's approach to character in a novel from his/her approach to character in an historical narrative.

Plot and character, then, are fundamental features of the two types of narrative and are available to the reader during his/her initial reading of the text. Other features of the narrative may be apparent to the experienced reader during the first reading, or to less experienced readers during subsequent readings. For many readers, though, plot and character may be as far as they go, because they seldom re-read a text, and so their literary competence does not develop far beyond this point. My study of actual readers of Naipaul, which includes non-professional as well as professional readers, highlights the differences between reading and re-reading. As Thomas Leitch has pointed out, "virtually all criticism is based on readings that are actually re-readings." This raises particularly acute problems in narrative theory, because whilst the basic features, plot and character, are available on a first reading, interpretation is

> typically based on features unavailable, or available to only a few readers, except in re-reading. In other words, the difference between the first reading of a story and subsequent readings is likely to be more complete, and more completely regulated by generic rules, than the difference between the first reading and subsequent readings of an essay or lyric poem. 7

There are clear implications here for a study of the way readers tackle different types of narrative. If the more sophisticated elements of literary competence are only likely to come into play during re-reading, much will depend on whether the text in question invites re-reading. In addition, the "generic rules" may activate differing concerns for the readers of novels and historical narratives.

So how can we describe the operations of the reader who has gone beyond reading for plot and character? In the literature of reader-response criticism there are numerous descriptions of readers following fictional narratives beyond this basic level (see, for example, Steven Mailloux's account of the reader's involvement in Hawthorne's

"Rappaccini's Daughter"[8]). Fictional narratives which meet the qualitative requirements of "literature" and thus, it might be argued, invite re-reading, can also be read for theme and symbol. The competent reader will expect to achieve a degree of integration between his/her perceptions of plot and character and the more static elements of theme and symbol. To quote from Culler again: "the goals towards which one moves in synthesizing a plot are, of course, notions of thematic structures."[9] Similarly, symbolic interpretation has a unifying effect, making connections which would not be possible at a merely causal level (Culler gives the connection between moustaches and villainy as a conventional example).

If one accepts Hayden White's argument that histories are also verbal fictions, sharing many of the techniques of a novel, there seems to be no reason why readers of histories should not also be seeking to achieve an integrated perception of the narrative's various elements. I have not been able to discover, in the literature of reader-response criticism, any accounts of readers reading nonfictional narratives to set against accounts of fiction-reading, but some of the readings of The Loss of El Dorado to be discussed later do suggest that a high level of integration is quite possible. Readers who use terms like "pattern", "prefiguring" and "symbolizing" in their discussion of an historical narrative are, I would argue, employing the same kind of literary competence as novel-readers. However, whilst such reading may be possible, it seems to be less often achieved with historical narratives than with novels. One reason for this may be that generic considerations intervene. R.G. Collingwood, describing the close correspondences between the historian's work and the novelist's, sets out "three rules of method" imposed on the historian but not on the novelist; of these the most important is that

> the historian's picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence. The only way in which the historian or anyone else can judge, even tentatively, of its truth is by considering this relation. 10

Thus the reader of history is obliged to look <u>outside</u> of the narrative as well as within it. Questions about the use of evidence must be raised, and the text's relationship with other works of history must be considered. The plot of an historical narrative will have its own shape and logic, but it must also link with other plots (I am thinking, for example, of the choices the historian makes about where to begin and where to end his/her narrative). All these features contribute to the centrifugal impulse which readers of historical narratives experience. Although such narratives have their own aesthetic unity, generic considerations persistently lead the reader outwards in an effort to connect elements of this text with other texts or documents.

In contrast, the reading of fiction tends to be centripetal, and the re-reading of fiction even more so. Consideration of plot and character develops into awareness of theme and symbol, and although the reader may often in the process of reading make reference to the real world (particularly in the case of novels which fall within the tradition of realism), the purpose is usually to authenticate elements of the novel in such a way as to enhance the text's consistency and internal unity. For example, the reader of <u>Jane Eyre</u> might compare the Lowood school episode with biographical accounts of Charlotte Brontë's own school experiences, but if the reader's literary competence has developed along currently conventional lines, s/he will accept discrepancies between the two versions because although the real-life parallels may be interesting, considerations of artistic design in the novel are seen to be more important than factual accuracy; textuality overrides history. It could be argued, of course, that in moving outwards from a reading of <u>Jane Eyre</u> to Elizabeth Gaskell's <u>Life of Charlotte Brontë</u> the novel reader

is surrendering to the same kind of centrifugal impulses that I have said characterize the reading of historical narratives. Indeed, the initial reading of a novel does usually increase curiosity about the author, his/her life, circumstances, and other works. This in turn might lead to a wider interest in the author's times, contemporaries, and all the paraphernalia of literary history. But at each stage in this widening-out process it is still possible to draw boundaries around the text, and to distinguish between metacriticism and intrinsic criticism, the ultimate function of the former being, as Rodway says, to serve and enhance the latter. Intrinsic criticism, which in Rodway's scheme is primary, fuels the centripetal impulse in reading and re-reading. As the reader moves from plot to thematic structures, and from the multifarious details of character to unifying symbols, static elements of the text come to assume more importance. It might even be that interpretation of a novel, which we usually think of as taking account of as many elements as possible, requires a kind of stasis. This is not to say that interpretations are in any way fixed or permanent, but that the reader making an interpretation has, temporarily at least, settled at a particular point on the reading journey from which the balanced interplay of textual elements can be felt and described. Any notion of "poetic truth" arrived at by this process thus approaches a degree of consistency and completeness which is not really conceivable in the realm of historical narrative, where "truth" can only ever be fragmentary and incomplete; so it is that defenders of poetry and writers of fiction have been able to claim a higher status for poetic truth.

Interpretation of an historical narrative is not quite the same, even if the reader is fully responsive to the text's "literary" features. Indeed, "interpretation" may not be the most appropriate term to use for whatever account the reader gives of the narrative's meaning. The

historian has already performed an act of interpretation in selecting, ordering and expressing the historical evidence; the reader responds, as far as possible, to that interpretation and assesses its validity. No clear boundary can be drawn between the world of the historical narrative and the world it purports to interpret, and the reader is continually going to and fro between these worlds. The centrifugal impulse is insistent, so even when the reader is in full command of the narrative's thematic structures, the centripetal tendency cannot usually counteract the centrifugal; the text remains dynamic, spiralling outwards to connect with the other verbal structures which comprise what we know as "history".

A theory of centripetal and centrifugal impulses thus implies that although readers process historical and fictional narratives differently this is not because different kinds of literary competence are involved. The same skills of reading for plot, character, theme and symbol are employed in both cases, but the pull exerted by differing generic conventions tends to call out or tone down particular elements in the reader's literary competence. Description of genre, or recognition of generic signposts, is therefore a crucial element in determining the shape of response. A great deal hinges on initial orientation, since once the reader is engaged with the text and the text is, as it were, in motion, the kinetic effects of centripetal or centrifugal tendencies grow increasingly difficult to resist. I want now to look in more detail at what determines the reader's initial orientation and how the centripetal or centrifugal impulses are activated.

The German reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss rightly observes that

> A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. . . . The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations

and rules familiar from earlier texts . . . 11

When we encounter new texts, or for that matter any new piece of information, our initial concern is to make connections which will establish the text or information in an existing framework of knowledge or experience. Sometimes the activity of connecting is entirely conscious and reasoned: for example, the student of Dickens who is reading all his novels in chronological order will have a well-defined slot ready for the reception of The Mystery of Edwin Drood. But sometimes connections are made almost unconsciously, and may depend on nothing more substantial than the title of a book or the illustration on its cover. The point is, though, that connections must be made, however provisionally. Each new text which comes within the orbit of our consciousness has to be attached before it can be read, so we look for "anchorage points" which will provide that initial link. Following up the image of texts as molecular structures, the concept of valencies would correspond here to what I have called anchorage points; texts, being complex structures, are multi-valent, so offer many potential points of contact with the reader's existing framework of knowledge. Sometimes the choice of anchorage points is subjective and idiosyncratic (one or two such examples will appear in chapter 4). But it is also possible to suggest some broad categories within which most choices would fall.

Very often it is the reader's perception of genre (or sub-genre) which provides the initial anchorage point for a new text. Acquaintance with the qualities of novels/thrillers/romances/biographies/histories in general will give the reader a good idea of what to look for in any specific novel/thriller/romance etc. There may, of course, be surprises in store depending on the conventionality of the text, but this kind of anchorage point is usually highly reliable because it enables the reader to key in directly to the appropriate reading conventions. Canonical texts also offer reliable anchorage points; knowing that a text is in

the canon usually includes knowledge of genre, and in addition canonical texts have a kind of quality guarantee, indicating that centripetal reading will be worthwhile. Another broad category for anchorage points is the context of culture: this can be very general and hazy (for example, Western, post-Renaissance), providing only weak anchorage points, or much more specific (English mid-nineteenth-century, for example). Even where there is a cultural distance between author and reader, the reader's increasing familiarity with a specific cultural context makes each new text easier to anchor. Sometimes, of course, it is the author him/herself who provides the initial anchorage point, and although expectations about genre often follow from knowledge of the author one has to be prepared (as in Naipaul's case) for other possibilities. Where several of these categories overlap, initial anchorage points are plentiful and will usually remain as permanent ones. However, with some new texts initial anchorage points are scarce, and the reader may have to try some provisional links until s/he has gone far enough in reading the text to establish stronger connections. Very often, as I have suggested, the choice of anchorage points depends on the individual reader's experience and preferences, but the influence of interpretive communities can probably be detected in such choices, too. For example, critics who approach Naipaul's work from the perspective of Commonwealth literature are, I suspect, more likely to choose anchorage points which will locate his writing within a tradition of West Indian writing, and which will enable them to key easily into particular themes. Anchorage points, then, are essential for the reader's initial orientation towards a text, and they may in themselves dispose the reader towards centripetal or centrifugal reading; but they may also be purely provisional, discarded once the reader has picked up enough clues from the text to suggest more reliable connections.

Having oriented the reader towards a new text, we now need to consider how centrifugal or centripetal impulses are activated during reading. The way this happens, I suggest, is by positive displacement of individual elements in the text, often very small elements. For example, the reader of The Mimic Men, knowing the text to be a novel, might register the narrator's first reference to a metaphorical shipwreck ("I knew that my own journey, scarcely begun, had ended in the shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid" [p.7]) as an element of minor significance in its immediate context, but perhaps in the context of Caribbean islands (p.6) and "makeshift societies" (p.8) likely to acquire fuller significance. This element is thus displaced, lifted from its immediate context and held in readiness for linking with other symbolic and thematic elements which will contribute to the centripetal patterning of the text. Other elements in the novel might be displaced centrifugally (for example, an early reference to the treatment of the Jews during the second world war: "I knew of recent events in Europe; they tormented me." [p.5]), but it is the overall balance of the displaced elements which matters. Once the centripetal impulse of the text is confirmed, the inward displacement of textual elements becomes ever easier, particularly as re-reading progresses. In contrast, the reader of The Loss of El Dorado will encounter, at the beginning of the book, maps of Venezuela and the Eastern Caribbean and of Trinidad in 1797. These elements are displaced centrifugally, perhaps to link with a larger mental map of Central America, or familiar nearby dates in European history. The reader who is in doubt about the genre of The Loss of El Dorado may be disposed to find centripetal pointers in chapter titles like "The Mountain of Crystal" and "Fathers and Sons", but although valid this impulse will not counteract the centrifugal pull of historical and geographical detail in which the opening of the text abounds.

The idea of textual elements being positively displaced either centrifugally or centripetally can be related to Culler's concept of models of coherence, oriented either towards "reality" or "literature". My illustration of chronological awareness in The Loss of El Dorado is an example of a reality model in operation, whilst awareness of the shipwreck metaphor in The Mimic Men reflects a literature model of coherence. However, I have already suggested that in some areas, for example, in reading for character, reality and literature models may be very difficult to disentangle. Analysis of historical narratives in terms of models of coherence also presents special problems, since such narratives are built on reality models, but, as in Kintgen's CONNECT: WORLD category, we have to confront the difficulty that knowledge of history is derived from reading. For example, at the beginning of The Loss of El Dorado Naipaul refers to Sir Walter Ralegh in terms which suggest that the reader will have some previous knowledge of this figure; the existence of Ralegh is part and parcel of our shared knowledge of the past. But as Naipaul also makes clear, that knowledge of Ralegh is derived from other writings, Ralegh's own, his contemporaries', or later historians'. So our access to reality models of coherence can sometimes only be through literature (in its wider sense). Whilst this does not invalidate the concept of models of coherence, it does mean that it is not an especially effective tool for distinguishing between what readers do when reading nonfiction and what they do when reading fiction. I hope to overcome this problem in my theory of centrifugal or centripetal displacement by focusing more on the use readers make of displaced elements than on the conceptual frameworks involved.

Related to the idea of readers being equipped with literature models of coherence is the concept of intertextuality. Here again, I think that nonfictional as well as fictional narratives are written and read in the context of other texts, so this cannot be used as a distinguishing

characteristic. However, like metacriticism which ultimately serves intrinsic criticism, we can perhaps see intertextual reading as ultimately serving centripetal reading. If texts are like multi-valent molecular structures attaching themselves to other texts (Jane Eyre, for example, linking with Villette, Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte and Rhys's The Wide Sargasso Sea, to name just a few of the many possible connections), the whole inter-connected mass forms a kind of crystalline structure which may change over time as new molecules are added on. Thus, as Leitch suggests [see p.20 above], the total context for fiction cannot be precisely defined (it changes as new works are written, or as new connections are discovered), but it is not infinite; also, a definite boundary can be drawn around the fictional work itself, so that a minimum context for any part of the text can be coherently defined. The same is not true of historical narratives: their context includes other texts, but it also includes, however distantly, the real past, so their context is infinitely expandable and always indeterminate. This is the context to which the centrifugal impulse in reading reaches out: other texts are invoked not only to make sense of the given narrative and confirm its centripetal patterning, but to provide the evidence that will ultimately relate this narrative to the real past.

A theory of centripetal and centrifugal reading thus fits conveniently with conventional distinctions between fiction and nonfiction and provides a way of describing how different narratives are read. But because it is not based on "either/or" categories, it also permits conditions in which reading may be balanced between the two opposing impulses, so texts which fall "between the genres" (that is, not fitting neatly into currently accepted generic pigeon-holes) can also be accommodated. In chapter 7, which offers a reading of The Enigma of Arrival, I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of my theory with regard to a generically problematic text.

Before that, however, the theory will be tested with the two texts I have already used for illustration: The Mimic Men and The Loss of El Dorado. In chapters 4, 5 and 6 I shall attempt to describe the way three groups of actual readers read these texts. The first group consists of volunteer, non-professional readers (in some ways like those who featured in Holland's and Kintgen's studies); the second group consists of reviewers, and the third, professional critics. The focus in chapter 4 will be on the individual dynamics of reading. In chapters 5 and 6 the focus will widen out to include questions about literary criticism as an institution.

CHAPTER 4: THE MIMIC MEN AND THE LOSS OF EL DORADO (1):

REAL READERS READING

As the title of this chapter implies, I believe that any theory of reading ought to take account of actual reading practice [see p.55 above]. Although the reviewers and critics whose readings of The Mimic Men and The Loss of El Dorado will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6 are no less real than the informants featured in this chapter, their reading can only be studied at a distance, through the medium of their published writings. The main advantage of an informant-based study is that it provides opportunities for a closer (though still not immediate) analysis of reading as a process. There are two further reasons why I want to test my theory of reading on "ordinary" (by which I mean non-professional, not unsophisticated) readers. The first is to make available a range of evidence: seeking out the responses of ordinary readers helps to balance the specialization of published critiques, written by people with a vested interest in the criticism industry. This evidence may include hints about the connections between ordinary readers and the institutions which teach the reading of literature, but that is not the main concern here. The second reason for being interested in ordinary readers is that in discussing the work of a contemporary writer like Naipaul, they are as important as professional critics; however complex the relationship between writer and society may be, both types of reader are part of that society. Ordinary readers' responses to Naipaul are more obviously relevant than would be, for example, their responses to writers like Milton and Bunyan who have become more fully the property of literary institutions.

In describing the studies by Holland and Kintgen I mentioned that their chosen texts were, respectively, short stories and poems. The types of narrative texts I am interested in are, of course, much longer,

but despite the complications involved in using book-length texts with informants, I judged that it would be impossible to test my theory fairly by using extracts, since this would not provide the minimum necessary context for either fictional or nonfictional narratives. Accordingly, I looked for two works which would be more or less comparable in terms of length, period of writing, theme and setting; with these considerations in mind, The Mimic Men (1967) and The Loss of El Dorado (1969) seemed the most suitable of Naipaul's works.(These titles will now be abbreviated to MM and LED.) The extent to which LED is a "proper" history will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6; but it is clear from the bibliographical information in the book's Postscript that the narrative is nonfictional, and so can appropriately be contrasted with the novel which preceded it.

It may be helpful at this stage to say a little more about the methods used by Holland and Kintgen, since their studies provided the initial stimulus and several specific pointers for my own inquiry. Holland's project in 5 Readers Reading [see p.56 above] was to explore the extent to which the reader's personality shapes the reading experience. Since the usual methods of psychological testing were not really applicable, Holland decided "simply to fish for a method by seeing what issues emerged when [he] conducted more or less undirected interviews with a few readers who had taken standard personality tests. . . . Finally, this lack of method became itself the method."[1] It was first tried in an exploratory way with a group of graduate students from Holland's own university; subsequently he interviewed a larger group of volunteer readers, undergraduate English majors from a nearby college, five of whom provided the material for the study. Each reader met Holland on a weekly basis, to discuss the text which it had previously been agreed that s/he should read. The interviews, each about an hour

long, were recorded and transcribed. The central aim of the interview was "to get each reader to say as much as he could or would about the story, either in statements he volunteered or in answers to questions."[2] Having decided to use a similarly informal interview method for my project, I noted Holland's point about the interviewer's demeanour: "I tried very hard never to express shock or surprise or annoyance or any sense that there was a 'right' reading."[3] Kintgen's method was rather different. His informants, advanced graduate students, were sent away on Monday mornings with a copy of a poem and two hours' worth of tape cassettes. Their instructions were: "try to verbalize everything you do in coming to a complete understanding of this poem . . . Try not to censor anything."[4] The act of reading and the vocalizing of interpretive processes would thus be as near simultaneous as possible. To provide a context for the reading, a group discussion of the set poem took place at the end of each week.

Both these studies provided helpful markers for the planning of my own project, although the kinds of texts being used were very different. With book-length texts there was no hope of retrieving the kind of immediate experience Kintgen's method aimed at, and memorial reconstruction was harder for my informants than for Holland's short story readers. The institutional context in which my project was carried out was also very different from that of the two college-based studies. I work in adult education, and my informants were drawn from extra-mural classes. So whereas Holland and Kintgen were working with full-time, presumably fairly young students, my informants were mature part-time students, several of them retired, less homogeneous in terms of educational background than college students, and not (in Kintgen's terms) "professional" academic readers. Also, a researcher working with adults who attend one or two extra-mural classes a week enjoys an informal, interest-based relationship with them, which I imagine is in some ways different from

a full-time university teacher's relationship with graduate or under-graduate students who are paid (even a nominal amount) to take part in a project. Another consequence of working with informants who are not full-time students and so not necessarily available for interview immediately after their reading is that their responses are more considered and perhaps more diffuse. However, the circumstances in which my informants carried out their tasks may be closer to the ordinary way most of us read prose works than the intensely-focused college-based studies.

The volunteers who took part in my project were recruited from adult education classes in or near Nottingham. Recruitment began with a letter circulated to tutors of literature and history classes in the region covered by Nottingham University's Adult Education Department, asking them to outline the project to their class members and to supply reply slips to anyone who was interested. The project was described in this letter as forming part of "a postgraduate thesis on V.S. Naipaul, using a research method which involves studying readers' responses." No particular texts were named in the letter, nor did I use the terms "fiction" and "nonfiction". It was stressed that the only qualifications volunteers needed were a willingness to read two books by Naipaul and to talk about their responses. In return for the considerable time informants would be devoting to the project, I offered free places on a forth-coming extra-mural course about Naipaul. Eighteen people responded to this initial invitation, all of them current students in literature classes. Because individual sessions with each informant would be fairly time-consuming, I estimated that the optimum number of participants would be five or six; proximity to Nottingham, where the follow-up course was to be held, was the criterion for selection. Unfortunately, one of the original five volunteers had to drop out because of serious illness, and her place was taken at a later date by

B, whose husband K was also keen to take part. Because B and K joined the project later I had fewer opportunities for meeting them before we began the follow-up course, but nonetheless their contributions helped to fill out the data supplied by the other four informants.

In my initial contacts with the informants I purposely avoided asking for details of their educational background (to do so would, I felt, have detracted from the openness of the informant qualifications mentioned above). But during the individual interviews the informants gave spontaneous information about their backgrounds and reading preferences. For example, after finishing LED, C said, "I've always read a lot of history and biography", whereas A said, "I don't read much history . . . I prefer novels." As it happened, the quartet of readers who supplied most of the data divided neatly into two who were very accustomed to reading history, and two who preferred novels and rarely read history. However, although their backgrounds were varied, they had all during the previous year attended genre-based literature courses with titles such as "English Fiction Between the Wars" or "European Novels". I assumed, then, that although the informants' literary competences might differ according to the individual reading and educational experience each of them had accumulated, there would also be some common ground.

Ideally I would have liked to present my informants with texts they had not read before. However, I was aware that MM, which fairly often appears on booklists for extra-mural courses about the post-war novel, might already be familiar to some readers. They were less likely to have read LED in the context of an adult education class, since the departmental library which supplied the sets of texts for the project had not stocked this title before. But in order to observe something of the readers' initial choice of anchorage points, I did not mention titles until I provided them with copies of the two texts at our first meeting.

I tried to make the meetings as informal as possible by seeing the informants in their own homes or, if it were more convenient, at the University Adult Centre. At the initial meeting with each informant I explained that the aim of the project was to study readers' responses to the chosen books, and stressed that all responses were valid. I also repeated two points made in my initial letter, that the actual identities of informants would not be disclosed in anything I wrote, and that they would be welcome to read the finished research. I encouraged them to verbalize their thoughts as fully as possible, although I recognized that they would not be as practised in this respect as Holland and Kintgen's informants, or so accustomed to the "experimental" situation. But on the whole I tried to follow Holland's "more or less undirected" interview technique, introducing impromptu questions when I felt it would be helpful to pursue a particular line of inquiry further or when the informant's silence suggested that s/he had, for the moment, exhausted a topic. I tried to keep the terms of my questions fairly neutral (I often fell back on "satisfactory/ unsatisfactory aspects of your reading"), and although I was sometimes beguiled into trying to clarify points by putting them into my words, I have taken care in analysing the transcripts not to attribute any such "prompts" to the informant, even if s/he registered agreement. In my original plans, I had hoped to compare the informants' readings of selected passages in order to offset the diffuseness of the material. However, this did not prove to be a productive procedure, perhaps because it was too far removed from the class-discussion context the informants were used to. So I decided to let them determine whether particular passages should be singled out, although I did try to direct their attention to the end of MM by asking what they made of "Garbage", and I also asked what questions they were left with at the end of the two books.

The number of times I was able to see each informant varied according to the pace of their reading and the ease with which we could arrange to meet (here again there were constraints which Holland and Kintgen would not have encountered with their full-time students). Each interview was recorded, and transcribed as sympathetically as possible in order to reflect intonation and expression. I am keenly aware, however, that just as the words spoken by the informants are only a part, the most conscious part, of their response to the text, so the bare transcript of the spoken words is only a partial record of that conscious response. Selections from these transcripts appear in appendices 1 and 2 [pp.200-203].

In the initial meeting with each informant, then, my aim was to discover, if possible, what kinds of anchorage points were being established with regard to the two texts, and whether these predisposed the readers to any particular reading strategies. I was very aware, at this stage, of the importance of the physical format of the texts (the "channel" or "contact" element in Jakobson's model of communication). We were using Penguin editions of both books, so there was a degree of uniformity here, and although the texts are classified as "Fiction" or "History" in small type on the back cover just above the International Standard Book Number, none of the informants appeared to be guided by this, although several <u>were</u> influenced in their initial orientation by the back cover blurbs.

I had expected that, whatever the extent of their previous acquaintance with Naipaul, the informants would be most likely to approach him as a writer of fiction, and so might not immediately recognise <u>LED</u> as nonfiction. This was certainly the case with T, who had not read any of Naipaul's work before. She expressed strong preferences for nineteenth-century novels, and later, during her reading of <u>LED</u>, remarked that she couldn't remember when she had last read "an actual factual account of

history"; at the outset, though, she was unprepared for one of the texts to be historical, because she knew of Naipaul only through his reputation as a novelist. As a practised novel-reader, T's literary competence included a wide repertoire of potential plots, and her initial orientation towards both texts involved plot prediction. Using the opening of MM and the back cover, her first comment on the book was: "This one sounds as though it's got quite a lot of action . . . And presumably quite a lot of retrospective comments about how he came to be disgraced . . . and some sort of social comment about run-down gentility." In addition to anchoring the text in a concept of genre, T consciously looked for anchorage points in a context of culture: "Does it say when it's set? Ah, 'shortly after the war' . . . it doesn't tell you which war." Along with the search for period went a search for location - she noticed the narrator's reference to London in the first sentence of the novel, but having seen the name "Singh" on the back cover wondered whether he might be Anglo-Indian. These were, then, provisional anchorage points, working hypotheses which could be confirmed or revised as reading progressed. Similarly, with LED, T scanned the back cover and prefatory material, again looking for setting and period. She quickly realized that "this is much more historical" but couldn't find "how long a time-span it deals with." She talked about Trinidad and speculated, jokingly, on the possibility of this being "a larger than life, rather lurid story of dreadful goings-on in the sugar plantations" (adding, "I don't imagine for one moment it is!"). However, her attraction to an anchorage point based on a concept of fictional genre was also revealed in the comment: "You could imagine . . . in the hands of someone like Harold Robbins it could turn out to be rather different." Most interestingly, although T remarked on the amount of research that must have gone into the book and read out J.H. Plumb's comment about LED being a

history, she was still unsure how far to expect a factual account of Trinidad's past. Referring to the second paragraph of Plumb's summary, she picked out the phrase "what a story", and wondered whether Naipaul's book was "perhaps not so much an actual history as faction." Her provisional expectation that in this book Naipaul was writing fiction based on historical facts proved to be hard to dislodge.

A was interested in reading Naipaul because she knew that he came from Trinidad, where she had spent two years during the war, and where some of her relatives still live. Apart from that, she said, she knew nothing about Naipaul. As soon as she started to flick through LED she realized that it was about Trinidad and that it was historical (despite what she considered to be a misleading cover illustration and a puzzling title). She made no explicit comment about whether or not she expected MM to be fictional, but when she turned to LED again, remarked that as soon as she had opened it she had realized "this isn't fiction." So with little or no previous knowledge of Naipaul's output, A did not experience the surprise expressed by some of the other informants when they encountered the nonfictional work. Like T, A was unused to reading history, but her initial perception of LED's genre enabled her to proceed with a more productive, if critical, reading of the text than T was able to accomplish.

The third informant, C, recalled having read something by Naipaul years ago (probably A House for Mr Biswas) and firmly associated him with India. Her initial inspection of the two books produced surprise at the cultural and geographical range of his work, and her initial expectation that Naipaul would be writing about India was quickly revised as she established anchorage points for each text in a context of culture. She did not, however, seem surprised at the difference in genres; she selected LED to read first, saying, "I've got a bias towards history, and it is historical." C also made a point of looking for

the publication dates of both books, and remarked that this was a routine part of her approach to any book, again confirming the importance of cultural context as an initial anchorage point.

The three remaining informants, N, B and K, knew rather more about Naipaul's own life and circumstances. They had all read some fiction by Naipaul at an earlier date, and in the case of MM were struck by the parallels between Singh and Naipaul. N referred to this link fairly tentatively ("It won't be autobiographical, but . . ."); B, though, had considerable difficulty in separating the narrator of MM from Naipaul, and said that even after Singh's name was belatedly introduced into the narrative she still found herself thinking of "I" as Naipaul. In this case, an initial orientation anchored in knowledge of the author carried implications concerning genre which, like T's assumptions about genre in LED, proved to be both persistent and misleading. K spoke, rather more cautiously, about parallels between Naipaul's own life and Singh's, suggesting that he was not actually reading the novel as autobiography, but looking to Naipaul's biography for possible sources for his fiction. K's main surprise was in finding that LED was not a novel. Having joined the project late, he had gone to the library for a copy of LED, looking under "Fiction"; he finally found it under "Travel", but a nonfictional classification, even if an inaccurate one, seemed to provide a viable initial anchorage point.

N is a retired history teacher, and his orientation towards LED was particularly interesting. Like C, he looked at the date of publication, and moved from that to the autobiographical opening of the Foreword. At this stage he was assuming LED to be a novel, since he had read MM earlier and knew of Naipaul's reputation as a novelist. His next step was to establish a context of culture: "It seems to be about Trinidad - it's in the revolutionary period, 1797 [looking at the second map] -

he goes to the sixteenth century to begin with [looking at the opening of Part I: "The Mountain of Crystal: 1595-1595]." N then turned back to the Prologue, which opens: "This book is made up of two forgotten stories." At this point he began to question his initial assumption about genre: "This is two stories, then,it's not a novel . . . Is it two short stories? . . . there must be some link . . ." A further search through the prefatory material brought him to the table of contents, which divides the body of the text into three parts; this apparently disconfirmed his "two short stories" hypothesis (perhaps the length of the text was also a factor) and an alternative was beginning to suggest itself: "the historical side obviously attracts me . . . three parts . . ." By the time N had turned to the back cover and read J.H. Plumb's comments he was quite clear about the work's genre, quoting, "'It is history by a sensitive and highly intelligent novelist and as remote from professional history as one can imagine.'" Later he turned to the Postscript and Naipaul's account of his sources, and his reading proper apparently started here: "as a historian, I wanted to know what his bibliography was . . ." At the end of our initial meeting, N returned to the importance of the cultural context of the two works:

> "I must try to get onto his wave-length . . . the problem is that . . . although he writes in English he's not an English writer - he comes from a very different cultural background . . . so that what I'm going to be trying to understand is what he's really trying to say . . . trying to shed my own English, Western European prejudice and try to enter his expatriate world . . .

The informants' initial encounters with the two texts thus confirmed the importance of anchorage points in helping to shape the reading which was to follow. As far as anchorage points in a context of culture were concerned, the informants showed a high degree of conscious adjustment, whether towards the familiar or the unfamiliar elements in this context. That openness to the "unfamiliar world of the literary text" which Iser sees as part of the process of reading [see p.46 above] seemed to show

itself in my informants as a pre-disposition as well as being a factor during reading. More significant, though, was the less conscious selection of anchorage points relating to genre. Sometimes, as we have seen, these were based on knowledge of the author, sometimes, perhaps, implicitly assumed from the kinds of texts (i.e. fictional) that informants were accustomed to reading in the adult education context we shared. But whatever the source, misconceptions of genre precipitated some informants into readings which were unproductive and unsatisfying, and adjustment to an alternative view of genre was sometimes very difficult to achieve. This point will, I hope, emerge more fully in the following analysis of two readers' contrasting approaches.

The responses of N and T to the two texts provide plenty of scope for further exploration. I have chosen these two partly because their responses happened to be particularly full (both verbalized their thoughts with comparatively little prompting) and partly because they brought to the texts very different reading backgrounds, N being a retired history teacher who had recently joined a literature class in order to develop a new interest, and T a very experienced novel-reader who is not only familiar with a wide range of authors but also regards re-reading as a routine part of her approach to novels. We have already seen that N and T adopted at the outset quite different stances towards LED. T's initial approach, like her approach to MM, involved looking for a potential plot. I met her after she had read about a third of the book, and the recurring theme of her comments was the confusion she felt. She related this, very early on, to her lack of knowledge of West Indian history, apart from a vague memory of Ralegh having gone to Trinidad. This suggests a centrifugal impulse at work, but thwarted by a lack of other texts to attach LED to. But another element in T's confusion concerned the characters in LED. All the informants commented on the number of characters who appear, sometimes very briefly, in the

course of the narrative, and their difficulty in keeping track of them (for some informants this was initially a problem with MM, too). But T was ready to invest considerable interest in individual characters and was disappointed when the narrative left them behind:

> I was obviously quite interested in the first person who was mentioned, Antonio de Berrio - I felt a bit sorry for him, really - he'd come there as a retired soldier of sixty, when he might have been sitting at home in Spain enjoying life and there he was, involved in all this - I felt rather sad on his part. And Sir Walter Ralegh as well - I felt sad about him - I knew what happened to him, how it all came to nothing and he lost his son and went home to be beheaded . . .

In fact, the part of the narrative dealing with Ralegh, where centrifugal reading was meaningful for T, seems to have been one of the most satisfactory parts of her reading, enabling her to link incident with theme (she had talked about greed and exploitation, and the suitability of "nasty ends"). But at this stage her main hope for the remainder of the book was "to be able to get to grips with the characters a bit more - if I'd seen them for a bit longer. . . . I'm ever hopeful that the odd woman might appear as well." She hoped that in the next section (Part 3) there would be an in-depth study of a particular incident, so that "you may get to know personalities in a much more detailed way than has happened at the beginning." She also pinned part of her dissatisfaction with the book on an absence of dialogue:

> I felt a bit like Alice, really, I didn't mind there being no pictures but I did mind the no conversation. And although there were actual things that people had written, it was only what they'd written down, their version of things - yes, I found the lack of conversation bothered me, really.

Thus her expectations based on the experience of novel-reading, combined with a lack of centrifugal reference points, made the reading of LED a frustrating process for T (far more negative, she implied, than having to continue with novels which, at the outset, she had disliked). The theme of cruelty and exploitation in the name of empire-building certainly did not escape T, but without a coherent view of the text's overall plot

or shape she was unable to synthesize her perceptions of character, incident and structure.

N was able to adopt a far more confident approach to LED because he quickly identified the genre as history (even if he was not expecting "orthodox" history from a writer known primarily as a novelist) and because he already knew something about West Indian history. Like all the other informants, N "lost track of the people sometimes" but this did not really interfere with his grasp of the narrative because he had an overall conception of the book which did not depend for its coherence on Naipaul's treatment of any one character or group of characters. He said, "I think Trinidad is the hero of this story, in a way, rather than any of the individuals - he's trying to distil the essence of Trinidad" - this despite his criticism that "from a historian's point of view, he tends to concentrate on individuals." Sometimes, as N pointed out, this concentration on individuals involved deviation from conventional views: "for example, the picture of Ralegh is very different from an English historian's Ralegh, or Bolivar, or Miranda. He's not really trying to get at the truth, he's trying to make a case." Later, however, N observed that "there's no absolute truth . . . I believe the only thing a historian can do is impose a pattern." So although N used centrifugal reading to locate LED in a context of other historians' approaches to the same subject-matter, and also acknowledged that Naipaul "makes you want to read some of the things that he's read himself, which I think is the mark of a good historian", he was also able to read LED centripetally, looking for "the pattern, the structure, the way he puts the story together."

When it came to MM, it was N's turn to express puzzlement: he felt that some parts of the novel were "rather obscure", and even that Naipaul might be indulging in "deliberate mystification". All the informants commented on the peculiar inversion of Ralph Singh's three-part narrative (which produces a B/A/C pattern) and on the smaller, more submerged shifts

in chronology within each section, but N was particularly troubled by the time-scheme, even though he recognized "there's no reason why a novel should be in strict sequence." He devoted considerable attention to this problem in his second reading of the novel, tracking movements forward and backward in time within single paragraphs, trying to find out why it had been written in this way. He pinpointed Singh's "justification for narrative breakdown" on p.243, but did not find it a very satisfactory explanation, hinting that this might be a piece of Naipaul's "deliberate mystification". He did not, apparently, consider the possibility of ironic distance existing between author and narrator, for his assessment of Singh's character depended more on the "truth to life" test than on the tone of his self-disclosure. The strategy of testing out a novel's relation to real life, on the basis of one's own experience, was a prominent feature in N's approach to MM, corresponding to his centrifugal reading of LED. He found the account of Singh's student life "strange, exotic," adding "I must have led a very sheltered life!" He also found the characterization of the older Singh in some respects unconvincing: "I can't really imagine a failed colonial leader who'd be quite so dispassionate, so analytical." But it was the women characters he considered least "adequate", and he returned several times to the topic of Singh's marriage and the characterization of Sandra. His very first comment was about Sandra's absence from the narrative until about half-way through the first part, and he later remarked, "What puzzles me is why he didn't mention Sandra in the earlier part"; he also said that there was "no attempt to look at [the breakdown of the marriage] from Sandra's point of view." My guess is that N had predicted a certain kind of plot (in which the appearance of a central character on the threshold of his or her first important sexual relationship leads the reader to expect that that relationship will be at the core of the novel)

and had not really revised that expectation as his reading continued. (N was not the only informant to pursue an unsustainable plot-line for MM: B saw the young Singh as a member of an oppressed minority who would heroically confront prejudice in Britain, then return to Isabella to put his socialist beliefs into practice; she felt "let down" by his casual approach to sexual relationships and his materialism.) But even though N was left with some unresolved problems at the level of character and plot, the centripetal impulse in his reading was evident in his comments on "Garbage" - introduced for "a dramatic conclusion . . . He may have some symbolic meaning as well, but I felt he was mainly a device" - and on the novel's title:

> There's something about "mimic" that I was wondering about . . . whether he intends it to mean that colonial leaders ape western ideas or whether there's anything more to it . . . Human beings generally are too conceited about what they achieve - very often when you look at the career of a man, although he may have thought he was planning to follow this course, in fact if you look at it very closely you find then there's a lot of contingency . . . in that sense human beings are - if not the playthings of forces beyond them, at any rate influenced by them.

It seems to me that N was moving, however tentatively, in the direction of an interpretation which could only be reached via centripetal reading.

N read MM twice ("I got the gist of it first time, but it's better to have read it twice") but T felt that "this is a book I'd need to read two or three times before I actually got to grips with what I thought about it in a very definite sort of way." So, believing that the book needed to be seen as a whole, she was able to tolerate local uncertainties and what she called "haziness" in the belief that coherence might eventually emerge. A clear example of this unhurried approach appeared in her reference to the drowning incident in Part 2, section 2, which she had singled out as "beautifully described". She said: "I'm ever hopeful that at the end of the book I might be able to resolve for myself why it is significant, but I'm not totally convinced that I will be able to." This seems to be an instance of a textual element being positively displaced

and awaiting integration into a centripetal pattern which might only be perceived later or during re-reading. Similarly, T was not disturbed to the same extent that N was by the structure of the book. At the midway point she said, "I still find now I have to concentrate quite hard to work out exactly where we are" but she did not seem to find this as troubling as keeping track of the many characters who appear and disappear in LED. By the end of MM she had a provisional explanation for the narrative disruption, related to Singh's stream of ebbing and flowing memories. Like N, she referred to p.243, although to a slightly earlier passage, for an explanation of Singh's method, and she referred to Singh having said earlier that "he regards his life as a series of incidents, but he's not quite sure how they're connected together . . . he started writing and wrote as things occurred to him, rather than having thought the whole thing through." T's comment on Singh's relationships with women also recognized that the narrator's perspective is a partial one; at first, she said, "I didn't quite understand what he was at, but I think by the end I'd realized that basically he didn't get on terribly well with women - somehow or other he didn't fulfil their expectations and they didn't fulfil his either." Thus T's attention to narrative technique and the unfolding of a viewpoint produced an account of the novel's women characters fundamentally different from N's ("I've never met any women such as he describes here").

In comparing N's reading of the texts with T's I have perhaps looked for the contrasts between their approaches and highlighted them, but there were also similarities in their orientation towards the two texts, and at several points the evidence from other informants reinforced these similarities. I found that much time was taken up in the interviews with the question of narrative sequence, and there were interesting differences between the way informants perceived order in the fictional

text and their observations on narrative movement in the nonfictional work. These differences can, I think, be accounted for in terms of centrifugal and centripetal impulses during reading.

All the informants reported some difficulty in keeping track of events and characters in LED. T remembered having to re-read whole sections, from the Prologue onwards, and feeling confused by the number of characters who "seem to appear and disappear, but I suppose that's how people did." She also commented on the uneven progression of time in the narrative, and at the half-way stage in her reading this was raising expectations that the shape of the text or even the genre might change:

> It could carry on being just a history, or it may go off and be something else entirely. A lot of the book seems to be devoted to the torture of Luisa Calderon and presumably - it takes up a lot of the book - that can't be just a straight-forward history . . . in the way that the first part's covered a hundred years or something and this presumably only a short space of time, so I'm not sure what's going to happen at all.

T said several times that her knowledge of West Indian history was almost non-existent, and linked this with her difficulty in following the narrative sequence. A also reported having to make several starts with LED. She hoped that it would get easier as the chronology moved forward, but had to re-read Part Two, section 4, "The Three Revolutions". She also found she was unable to relate the El Dorado theme to the later part of the book. Like T, A emphasized her own lack of background knowledge: "I didn't know enough about what was going on in the continent of South America - I couldn't relate it." A eventually adopted a less concentrated approach - "I gave up trying to remember names and people and just tried to get the general trend" - but although this enabled her to complete her reading, her final impression was of fragmentation. She felt she could not relate the two halves of the book, or understand the significance of particular details (this emerged in her discussion

of Picton's trial). So for both T and A the centrifugal impulse was strong, but in the absence of appropriate reference points to which they could attach this particular narrative, centripetal reading was also thwarted. Some textual elements were displaced centripetally, for example, the El Dorado theme, but problems in managing the surface order of the text seem to have prevented deeper ordering, as one might well expect. N and C, as experienced readers of history, did not have the same difficulty, although both admitted having to re-read parts of LED because, in N's words, "the narrative dotted about so much." C felt this complexity was almost inevitable, given the nature of the material, and commented, "I can believe he's got his facts right, as far as they can be, between all the twists and lies." But both N and C seemed to be conscious of "narrative" as a separate element in the text, distinct from what N called the book's "pattern" and C the "plan". Because their reading of the narrative did connect centrifugally with other knowledge, problems with the surface order could be contained, allowing them to attend to the internal order which was emerging during reading. Although N and C only read LED once, they were sufficiently practised in the genre to be able to incorporate centripetal reading in their first encounter with the text. There was a suggestion in C's final comment that the pleasures of centripetal reading would play a larger part in re-reading: "I read [LED] as history - I knew I'd have to concentrate and look for facts. I shall go back and enjoy it now."

In the case of MM, however, the question of narrative order was seen from the outset as related to the overall "meaning" of the text and as a problem for the reader to solve. N, we have seen, was preoccupied by shifts and inversions in the narrative sequence, and indeed this was what he chiefly remembered from his earlier reading of the novel:

> I've forgotten it all mainly, but I remember vaguely the theme of this book and what puzzled me was . . . the time scheme that he adopted. It seems puzzling to me, I couldn't quite sort it

> out, why he'd written it in that particular way . . . I may be wrong, perhaps the sequence <u>is</u> clear and I haven't spotted it.

When on second reading the problem was still not resolved, N was inclined to regard the inverted chronology as gratuitous: "If he really planned it I cannot see how . . . A historian doesn't work like that. [Naipaul] likes to mystify, doesn't he?" Later he returned to the idea that the reader was being invited to create some kind of order: "I suppose even the deliberate mystification is a challenge for you to pick it up." Similarly, B commenting on the unexpected narrative order said, "I didn't find that was disastrous, I found that was quite good. It kept you on your toes and you were conscious of where you had to link up." K, too, found it "confusing at times - you're never quite sure whether he's looking back on events that have taken place in the past - the reader has to arrange this shifting narrative." C, like N, said she was puzzled and often had to re-read passages:"Several times I have gone back. . . you really do have to sort yourself out. At first it wasn't easy to sort out [Singh's] first visit from his second visit to London. I think I've got it straight now." C did not venture any explanation for the narrative inversion, beyond hinting that it might be a usual feature of Naipaul's writing, but seemed to accept that the reading process involved conscious ordering activity. A, however, was not so disturbed by <u>MM</u>'s narrative sequence; although she said she generally preferred stories that begin at the beginning, she picked up clues early on that the chronology would move back and forth, and saw this as part of the portrayal of "a person who is rootless." T, an experienced novel-reader like A, distinguished between the "big break" (i.e. p.83, the opening of the second section) - "a technique that is often used in books - the story starts and then you discover what's happened previously" - and the "little steps back" which have more to do with the ebb and flow of Singh's memories. She described the total effect as "almost conversa-

tional - a long series of conversations with somebody in his genteel hotel, but without any definite idea of when he was going to tell you which part." Like A, T integrated the concept of character with the unusual movement of the narrative, and there are hints that in so doing a centripetal impulse was leading them towards thematic structures for the novel: A's conclusion about Singh's rootlessness seems to be pointing in this direction, and T followed up her comments on Singh's imperfect perception of connections in his life [quoted on p.96] with "once or twice he makes remarks about being a prisoner . . . I think he feels he hasn't been a man of destiny, he's been more a creature of circumstance."

In trying to evaluate the evidence provided by the informants, I am aware of several severe constraints. In the first place, the data itself, the transcripts of our interviews, offers only limited insights into an extremely complex process, and individual transcripts reflect readers' differing abilities to vocalize their interpretive processes. Also, great caution is needed in generalizing from data supplied by only a handful of informants; any conclusions reached are bound to be provisional and localized. And it is not only individual informants who assume prominence in small scale research: the researcher is proportionately more visible too, so one needs to be aware of the part one's own interventions and interpretations have played in determining the outcome of the research. But, whilst recognizing the importance of these constraints, I think some tentative conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the idea of texts needing "anchorage points" does draw attention to the importance of cognitive frameworks for reading. And insofar as these anchorage points relate to concepts of genre they have a bearing on actual reading strategies for specific texts. It seems that readers <u>do</u> read fictional and nonfictional texts differently, in response to learned conventions of genre, and that problems arise when inappropriate

generic conventions are evoked. The evidence offered here also suggests that re-reading is a part of the reading process which deserves to be studied more closely. A theory of centrifugal and centripetal impulses, which recognizes the dynamic element in reading, does seem to be viable as a way of describing what happens when readers meet texts, although I am well aware that much fuller empirical investigation would be needed to confirm its validity. However, I am sufficiently encouraged by the provisional conclusions reached here to go on testing the theory with different kinds of readers and different kinds of data.

CHAPTER 5: THE MIMIC MEN AND THE LOSS OF EL DORADO (2):

A SURVEY OF REVIEWS

The informant-based project described in chapter 4 was stimulated by the close-range and detailed studies of Holland and Kintgen, and drew to some extent on their methods. No such model was available for the second stage of this inquiry, a survey of reviews of MM and LED, although an essay by Wendy Griswold in the American Journal of Sociology helped to define approaches to this kind of data. Griswold's study [1] was based on reviews of novels by another West Indian writer, George Lamming, and her central question was "Does a cultural object, such as a literary text, have a stable set of meanings, or do its meanings derive from the social context of its reception?"[2] Drawing on a large number of reviews from the United States, Great Britain and the West Indies, Griswold set out to compare the kinds of evaluation reached, including discussion of Lamming's style and his place in a literary canon, and the subjects and themes in his work which were referred to. She found that systematic differences emerged between British, American and West Indian reviewers. For example, American reviewers were pre-occupied with race, British reviewers were "conspicuously quiet on the subject of colonialism",[3] and West Indian reviewers were far more likely to place Lamming's work in a context of other West Indian writings. In effect, Griswold concluded, three different sets of meanings were constructed from the fiction of a single author. This statistical research by a sociologist of culture is clearly relevant to the notion of "interpretive communities" (defined in this case by nationality), even if the analytical instruments used seem a little blunt after the subtle probings of Holland and Kintgen. But the questions I want to ask in this chapter are rather different from Griswold's, and can only be asked, as it were, obliquely. Her statistical approach is also inappropriate for the much smaller collection of reviews I am dealing

with here. Nevertheless, Griswold's general remarks on the status of reviews as data for empirical inquiry bring out important differences between the type of evidence to be discussed here and that discussed in chapter 4:

> reviews of fiction are written by a literary and intellectual élite for an educated middle class that constitutes the market for fiction as well as the audience for book reviews in general. Meaning in book reviews is a two-stage fabrication: part comes from what reviewers find significant, part from what they think their readers will find significant. While reviewers may be aware of the two steps in this mediation, much of their communication depends on their social presuppositions: they simply take for granted that their readers have certain knowledge and interests. A reviewer tries to indicate "what is going on" or "what happens" on the book, and, in doing so, he or she is both answering questions about the book's meaning for himself or herself and trying to make the book meaningful to the assumed audience of educated middle-class readers. 4

Similar points can, I think, be made about reviews of nonfictional works taken from the same spectrum of the periodical market. Griswold also enumerates differences between West Indian, British and American systems of reviewing books; the most relevant for present purposes are that reviewers of fiction in Britain "are typically novelists or poets themselves, although a few are primarily journalists; they constitute a literary establishment that traditionally has had very little connection with the universities (although this now may be changing)"; American reviewers are "far more likely to be academics."[5] So whilst there may be some overlap between the kinds of readers studied here and those who figure in chapter 6, to the extent that some of the reviewers are professional academics, there are also good arguments for viewing them as representatives of a separate literary establishment.

The starting-point for my collection of reviews was R.D. Hamner's selected bibliography in the Journal of Commonwealth Literature (vol.X, no.1, 1975), supplemented by searches through likely periodicals. The sample collected was determined by date (I restricted the search to reviews appearing within 12 months of the books' publication dates) and

by availability. I had no means of access to the West Indian journals where Naipaul's work receives frequent attention, nor was I able to obtain all the American reviews in Hamner's list (I was particularly sorry not to have J.H. Plumb's account of LED in the Washington Post's Bookworld). In fact, the final collection of fourteen reviews is drawn from eight periodicals, six of them British. There are seven reviews of each book; LED was not reviewed in Encounter, nor MM in the Economist. Details of each review (date, title, authorship where known, and approximate length) are given in tables 1 and 2 below.

A further point that needs to be noted about the kind of evidence used here is that whereas the volunteer readers who took part in the project described in chapter 4 provided me with "custom-built" data, there are certain constraints involved in using published material as evidence of reading practices. The analysis of reviews in this chapter has to take account of the reviews' original function and limitations relating to space and context which may have affected the profile of response. However, the summarizing element in a review, even when it is focused on the book's plot or action, will indicate something of the reviewer's priorities in approaching either fictional or nonfictional narratives. Similarly, the critical assessment offered in a review is frequently bound up with expectations about the genre concerned. Another constraint one should perhaps be aware of is that the sensitivities of the period the reviews are drawn from may have affected response. The dismantling of the British empire which began in the 1950s had, by the late 60s, accelerated considerably, often amidst horrendous racial violence. The vacuum in the British identity created by the decline of empire was filled, at least partially, by the Commonwealth ideal - an ideal which attracted considerable sympathy in Britain throughout the 1960s, according to opinion polls taken at the time. But immigration, particularly from the West Indies, was creating

TABLE 1: REVIEWS OF **THE MIMIC MEN**

Periodical - Heading - Reviewer	Date	Approx. length
Times Literary Supplement Fiction: "Suburbia in the Sun" (Single review) Anon.	27 April 67	1,000 words
New Statesman New Fiction: "A Man of Style" (Leading item among reviews of 4 novels) Simon Gray	5 May 67	550 words
Spectator New Novels: "Exile's Story" (Leading item - 5 novels) Martin Seymour-Smith	5 May 67	450 words
Listener New Fiction (2nd of 4 novels reviewed) Hilary Corke	25 May 67	250 words
New York Times Book Review "Yesterday in Isabella" (Single review) Saul Maloff	15 Oct. 67	650 words
Encounter "Verandahs of Impotence" (Single review) Max Beloff	Oct. 67	1,700 words
New York Review of Books (Special Spring Fiction Issue) "Crack-Up" ("A Flag on the Island" also discussed briefly) V.S. Pritchett	11 April 68	2,000 words

TABLE 2: REVIEWS OF **THE LOSS OF EL DORADO**

Periodical - Heading - Reviewer	Date	Approx. length
New Statesman "Between the Epics" (The Conquistadors by Hammond Innes also briefly reviewed) Ronald Bryden	7 Nov. 69	2,300 words
Economist "Slave Colony" (Part of Autumn Books supplement with prefatory article: "The Biographical Approach to History") Anon.	8 Nov. 69	400 words
Spectator "For God and Profit" (Follows review of The Portuguese Seaborne Empire by C.R. Boxer) Hammond Innes	8 Nov. 69	300 words
Listener "Power, Glory and Imposture" (Single review) Karl Miller	13 Nov. 69	1,300 words
Times Literary Supplement "The failings of an Empire" (Single review) Anon.	25 Dec. 69	2,300 words
New York Review of Books "Triste Trinidad" (Single review) J.H. Elliott	21 May 70	2,000 words
New York Times Book Review "The Dark, Obverse Side of the Shining Myth" (Single review) Gregory Rabassa	24 May 70	1,400 words

racial tension at home; the National Front was formed in 1966, and the need for conciliation officially recognized by the creation of a Race Relations Board in the same year. In this climate, we might expect the British reviewers to be particularly sensitive to Naipaul's exploration of race and politics in MM and LED; this could well affect the extent of centrifugal reading discernible in the reviews. So, with these constraints in mind, I shall be asking whether there are differences between reviews of the fictional and the nonfictional work that can usefully be described in terms of centripetal and centrifugal reading. Also, since the reviewers of LED differ in their definitions of "history", I want to pursue the question: How far does description of genre predict the shape of response?

The seven reviews of MM vary in length from about 250 words to 2,000. The three shortest reviews (Listener, Spectator and New Statesman) are all part of longer articles dealing with three or four other works of fiction. Not surprisingly, these three reviews, along with Saul Maloff's in the New York Times Book Review, pay particular attention to Naipaul's achievement in terms of the techniques and conventions of the novel form.

Literary anchorage points and centripetal reading are most clearly exemplified in Simon Gray's New Statesman review, "A Man of Style". The title seems applicable both to the novel's narrator, Ralph Singh ("For once, then, the style really is the man") and to Naipaul, whose novel is described as "a complex and masterful achievement of style". However, the review itself is unambiguous in its separation of novelist and narrator. There are, says Gray, "occasional uncertainties of tone" in the novel,

> when Singh seems merely to be Mr Naipaul's own mimic man . . . But for the most part the double presence of autobiographer and novelist is marvellously maintained, and so we are not just witnesses to a strange confession, but participants in

> a search for the diseased child that continues to infect the adult self.

The second half of this sentence hints at another way in which Gray's reading of the novel is shaped by the conventions of the genre, in this case the prominence of the individual and what E.M. Forster calls "the hidden life" of characters. No other character is directly mentioned in Gray's review, so the emphasis is entirely on the protagonist Singh and his "fractured self". Gray draws attention to the continuity between Singh's childhood fantasy of himself as the "heroic victim" of shipwreck and the failed political leader, failed friend and failed husband he becomes - "finally shipwrecked out of life". Centripetal reading is clearly illustrated in Gray's comment that the metaphor of shipwreck is "so central to [the novel] that it has a virtually organising significance". Further attention to the novel's aesthetic unity is displayed in Gray's description of the tone and rhythm of the narrative:

> The incidents of both public and private history . . . are all given within one continuous meditation . . . There is no climax of self-revelation. Only, as different experiences are brought into focus, an increasing intensity in the rhythm of the prose.

Gray claims that Naipaul's prose belongs to "an immediately recognisable tradition - Henry James, Graham Greene - with echoes of Eliot's poetry." These are not the most frequently used anchorage points for Naipaul's work, but they point to a view of the novel that extends beyond concern with novelistic features such as characterization and narrative technique to embrace more poetic elements as well.

Saul Maloff, reviewing MM for the New York Times Book Review, comes to quite a different assessment of the novel, but his account, like Gray's, is dominated by the kind of interpretation which depends on centripetal reading, and by specific ideas about the unique qualities of fiction. He begins by summarizing the events of Singh's

life (mentioning the geographical scene-changes though not the inversions of chronology), but points out that such a synopsis creates a misleading impression of the book:

> All this sounds epic and dynastic, a "big" novel boiling with the great events of our time, caught, but not reduced, in the scope of a small island - brighter and clearer for the intensity of focus. But, in fact, the novel is nothing of the sort.

The implication here seems to be that a novel (or a certain type of novel) functions like a searchlight playing over the confused and complex mass of happenings in the world, and by a process of selection - synecdoche on a grand scale - renders them vivid and apprehensible. The trouble with MM, Maloff suggests, is that the action is not vivid. Instead of "rolling and thundering", it reaches the reader through the filter of the narrator's low-key detachment, "muffled by memory"; thus "encounters are described rather than enacted, recalled as from a great distance." Consequently the reader waits in vain "for the novel to happen. These recollected events fail to shatter the even tenor of the memoirist's voice and the overcontrolled surface, to burst into fiction . . ." Maloff is, I think, reading for centripetal connections but failing to find them; plot and method of narration do not integrate, so internal coherence is not achieved. Near the beginning of his review Maloff points out the similarities between Naipaul's own background and Singh's. The use being made of this anchorage point is uncertain. Maloff may be suggesting that since Naipaul is himself an uprooted colonial his fictional writing on this subject will have the validity of direct experience; but since Maloff judges the novel to be a failure and the characterization of Singh ultimately hollow, the argument for authenticity based on centrifugal reading does not apparently carry much weight. Another possibility is that he may be commenting on an autobiographical impulse in Naipaul's

fiction, which would deflect attention away from that gap between author and narrator emphasized by Gray. However, the conclusion of Maloff's review is unequivocal: he praises Naipaul's style ("Sentence for sentence, he is a model of literary tact and precision") and imagination (which - "despite any criticism that can be leveled against this book - is nothing but a novelist's"). So the review ends by asserting the missed potential of this particular novel, and the special qualities of the novelist's imagination.

The two shortest reviews, in the Listener and the Spectator differ from Gray's and Maloff's in that they make references (albeit brief) to the novel's documentary element. Hilary Corke in the Listener describes Singh as "a representative of what we must suppose, from our daily papers, to be a rapidly increasing class; an ex-politician from a newly emergent state . . ." Corke also praises Naipaul's ability to depict societies "with such deliberate faultless precision". Similarly, Martin Seymour-Smith in the Spectator says that the novel "has valuable documentary functions, which are too obvious, in view of the subject-matter, to need delineating"; it is "immensely informative". There is, clearly, a suggestion of centrifugal reading here, emphasizing the novel's referential dimension, its closeness to "real life". But there is also some evidence in these two short reviews of centripetal reading. Corke in the Listener begins by distinguishing Naipaul's work from more ephemeral "weekly rockets of the scene that come down as sticks, though they go up as stars." This is done by way of a Jamesian description of the novel's purpose, a purpose which in Naipaul's case is achieved cumulatively:

> Every novel of his adds a dimension to its predecessor, and penetrates a chamber deeper into the universal situation of being a human individual in mutual relationship with an inhuman society that is nevertheless composed of human individuals like oneself.

The stress on the relationship between the individual and society, and

on the universal element in fiction, places Naipaul's work firmly in a long tradition of the realistic novel, but this sentence also brings forward more specific intertextual associations (Naipaul's previous novels) to serve the idea of a vision which looks inward for the truth. In this very short review, evidence as to how interpretations have been reached is scanty, but there is a suggestion in the following complex image that Corke perceives internal coherence in the relationship between the novel's action and themes: "[Singh's] personal story . . . is only a thread upon which a giant interlocking bristle of crystals concretes out of the slowly congealing socio-political melt." The description of Singh's career as "tragic on the strictest Bradleyan view" also suggests an anchorage point in a concept of literary modes, and indeed an implied comparison with Shakespearean tragedy.

Martin Seymour-Smith in the Spectator finds MM simultaneously tragic and comic: "it is a tragedy about loneliness. The narrator's restraint, coolness and sense of humour do not hide the desperation of his solitude." The comedy arises from Naipaul's "special brand of detached observation, which only occasionally becomes merely arch or droll." Tensions between these modes help to account for the novel's complexity (a quality which, like "seriousness", is highly valued in this review). Seymour-Smith also recognizes the close textural relationship between fictional narrative and autobiography, a closeness played on by Naipaul through his use of the memoir-device, so that the novel "really does read like the thoughtful autobiography it purports to be." Like Gray in the New Statesman, Seymour-Smith is interested in the inwardness of Singh's characterization, and how this is communicated to the reader:

> Singh's agony of solitude, which is not brought about by problems of colour or political ambition, is unobtrusively revealed, mainly by means of the odd nature of his sexual contacts; but eventually the quality of his loneliness is conveyed with explosive power.

Details about Singh's relationships with women are thus displaced centripetally to connect the characterization of Singh with the central theme (as Seymour-Smith sees it) of loneliness. The review ends, like Corke's in the Listener, with a reference to Naipaul's reputation (already deservedly high) being further enhanced by his latest novel. So these two short reviews have much in common: there is some evidence of centripetal reading, although less marked than in the reviews by Gray and Maloff, and slightly guarded references to the topicality of Naipaul's subject-matter.

The next two reviews take up the sensitive (in 1967-8) issue of how "Commonwealth" writers should be regarded. The anonymous review in the Times Literary Supplement claims that Naipaul has given "commonwealth literature" a new status:

> The term has rarely been used to compliment a novelist, apart from some Nigerians, but The Mimic Men discusses, evokes and exemplifies the situation of the former dependencies with such vigour and intensity that the vague, sometimes patronizing description is given a fresh dignity.

Thematic comparisons and contrasts are then made with Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People and Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters, as if to underline the importance of a wider, less insular view of the novel. But at the end of the review, when an historical perspective is needed on the topic of class, it is an English tradition which is recalled: the schoolboys of Isabella have doubts about their rank and status which "reflect a common suburban or provincial insecurity, especially among novelists (from Fanny Burney to D.H. Lawrence)". Although Naipaul is discussed here in the company of other novelists, the review makes no mention of his previous fictional writing. On the other hand, it is the only one of the seven reviews which refers, even indirectly, to his nonfiction ("he has recently been casting a cold eye on East Africa and on India where his grandfather was born"). The selection of anchorage

point in Naipaul's nonfictional writing may be linked to the evidence of centrifugal reading in the following passage:

> The political situation in his imaginary island may remind readers of Guyana as much as anywhere; but the relevant section is written in a manner so generalized, so like that of a thoughtful historian interpreting well-known events, that the conclusions seem to refer to many different societies.
>
> . . . the disorders relate to the breaking-up and "modernization" of an old colonial regime with its race-class hierarchy and its memories of slavery; but there is no mention of the C.I.A. or any other factor which might make the story refer precisely to the downfall of Cheddi Jagan.

Thus the review simultaneously draws on accepted knowledge about the contemporary world, which readers would be expected to share, and also comments on the way Naipaul has appropriated the style of "accepted knowledge" discourse, for part of the novel. This reviewer is very aware of variations in the tone of the narrative (in the final section of the novel there is "a Horatian evocation of the narrator's present life") and of changes in focus. These changes are related to the novel's structure: "The novel is built not with flashbacks, nothing so crisp, but a kind of dissolving technique." Although the terminology here is cinematic rather than literary, it does, I think, suggest centripetal reading, along with the displacement of references to suburbia to link with the theme of mimicry: "[Singh] holds that he and his contemporaries, on the island of Isabella, are imitative suburbanites." Overall, though, the centrifugal impulse seems to be strong in this review.

Whereas the TLS review claims that Naipaul has given the term "Commonwealth literature" a fresh dignity, V.S. Pritchett, writing almost a year later in the New York Review of Books' Spring Fiction Issue, seeks to separate him from what he sees as an inferior tradition and to install him firmly amongst the "younger English novelists":

> After their first success with their native scene, most African, Indian or West Indian novelists who have made the emotionally and politically disrupting journey to Oxford or London run aground on the shallows of journalistic writing: assertion and loneliness coarsen them. Everything becomes,

> crudely, a problem. Mr Naipaul has had the sensibility and the stamina to avoid this. He feels his pain, but he is in command.

Pritchett seems to be aware of the problems which often accompany "outsider" status, but implies that the English novel tradition is not only longer but somehow deeper; for example, Naipaul is said to "share with many English novelists natural and serious feeling for the fantasy life of his characters." (Surprisingly, though, Pritchett's account of MM makes no reference to Ralph Singh's fantasy life.) Pritchett's choice of anchorage point in a concept of genre is reinforced by his references to Naipaul's earlier work: he mentions two previous novels, A House for Mr Biswas and Mr Stone and the Knights Companion, but says nothing about the nonfiction. All this might lead us to expect plentiful evidence of centripetal reading in Pritchett's review, but in fact there is comparatively little. Although it is the longest of the reviews, a large proportion of the 2,000 words is devoted to summary, with long quotations to illustrate specific vivid incidents, and the emphasis is on situation and action. The summary re-creates (in appropriately changing tenses) what for Pritchett are the mainsprings of the action in each part of the novel. In the first section it is Singh's marriage, which brings to the fore questions about class as well as race; in the second the main focus is on Singh's father and the effects of his behaviour on his son; in the final section "we get an amazing and intimate picture of an ecstatic, muddled, jealous, intoxicating revolutionary caucus." It is the mimetic element in the novel which matters to Pritchett ("Mr Naipaul puts the island and the people on the page with a physical clarity, whether the scene is violent or serene") and he accentuates the influence of "background", in terms of family, race, culture and education. This links, I think, with the particular novel tradition he has evoked at the start of the review: in A House for Mr

Biswas and Mr Stone and the Knights Companion Naipaul has, according to Pritchett,

> made a careful study of the "little man" and pushed forward the tradition of Pooter, Polly and the Napoleon of Notting Hill into regions that were more exposed and dangerous . . . In the new novel the colonial volcano erupts and the "little man" becomes the mimic man of his title.

Arguably, the choice of anchorage point has helped to determine the shape of response, in this case a response which stays mainly at the level of character and plot. But there is evidence of more penetrating centripetal reading in Pritchett's comment on the novel's organization: "It is put together ingeniously as a mosaic of recurring themes." He also sees a universal relevance in the central theme of mimicry, and expresses this in a way that strikes a balance between centripetal and centrifugal impulses:

> We are indeed all "mimic men," whether we are in London, New Jersey, Chile, and with a certain desperation and absurdity that link us with the inhabitants of the pathetic island of Isabella.

The last of the seven reviews, by Max Beloff in Encounter, also evokes a particular novel tradition, this time of the political novel. Beloff comments on the surprising scarcity of the political novel in contemporary European writing, though he notes that England has had a long tradition in the genre, going back to Disraeli and Trollope. One of the features of the British or American political novel is that because "the scene is ready set, . . . the codes of action generally accepted, . . . verisimilitude is all too easy to attain. Readers will be alert to departures from it, the danger is a too obvious roman à clef." The political novelist in the post-colonial world faces the opposite problem, having no stable institutions or codes of behaviour on which to build his/her fictional world, no generally understood conventions to draw on. It is noticeable here that Beloff's choice of literary genre as anchorage point is the one which, of all genres,

seems the most likely to invite centrifugal reading. The rest of the review bears out this tendency. The outline of Singh's story in "four well-marked phases" - childhood, youth in England, political involvement in Isabella, and exile - is reorganized so that it follows a chronological order rather than the novel's inverted sequence (and no reference is made to the original sequence). There are numerous references to the contemporary world and our means of access to knowledge about that world: for example, "the 'new men' whom we know from the history of so many other islands and territories" or "the 'political élites' of the New States whose earnest 'profiles' form the subject of so much writing by solemn American political scientists and sociologists." The significance of the novel is seen as lying in the political judgements which emerge from Singh's memoir. Singh's analysis of post-colonial society as "fragmented, inorganic" is presented as authoritative, and Beloff adds his own comment: "Thus freedom leads to chaos." He points out that it is difficult, in the novel's meditative passages (he quotes the part dealing with Singh's early intention of writing a history of empire), to know "whether the views expressed are those of Mr Naipaul's hero or of Mr Naipaul himself." However, he also comments on the relationship between the first-person narration and the oblique presentation of events in the novel:

> The political career of his hero hardly figures in the text; perhaps because we are asked to concentrate on the individual at the heart of the political process, events can be suggested rather than described at length as by an historian.

So here the narrative method is (tentatively) justified in terms of what the reviewer sees as the novel's purpose. But this impulse is short-lived. The final paragraph of the review acknowledges the complexity of the "real" problems which are exposed in the course of the novel, the problems of power in broken societies. However, even though Beloff's main interest seems to be in the problems themselves, he does not ignore

the special contribution the novelist can make towards an understanding of the problems: "The artist as usual sees deeper than the scientist."

These seven reviews of MM vary considerably, then, in the evidence they present about centripetal reading. It is instructive to compare the first review discussed, Simon Gray's in the New Statesman, with the last, Max Beloff's in Encounter, to see how the same novel can apparently be read either centripetally or centrifugally. Most of the reviews, however, include a mixture of the two tendencies. Perhaps the most significant outcome of this part of the survey is in the relationship sometimes revealed between conscious anchorage points and reading responses.

Analysis of the LED reviews is more complicated because although the book's sub-title is "A History" this classification is by no means universally accepted. Some of the resistance can be traced to the fact that Naipaul is known primarily as a novelist and is not a professional academic historian. But there is also the more general consideration that "history" as a generic label admits a wide range of interpretations. As the following pages show, reviewers' expectations about history as a genre vary considerably. Those who see it as a literary form usually approve of the way Naipaul applies his novelist's craft to nonfictional material. Other reviewers find LED's novelistic qualities incompatible with their usual definition of historical writing, so they devise new categories for the work (for example, "personalised" as distinct from academic history - Spectator) or describe it as a kind of hybrid ("neither exactly a novel nor exactly a history" - New York Review of Books). As with the MM reviews, both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies are in evidence, but there is much more overt reference to the contemporary relevance of LED, both from the point of view of

racial conflict in Britain and Black Power uprisings in the Caribbean.

Rather than analyse each of the seven reviews in turn, as I did with the reviews of MM, I intend to summarize the position each reviewer adopts with reference to LED's genre, and then compare in some detail two of the British reviews, Ronald Bryden's in New Statesman and Karl Miller's in the Listener (the full texts of these reviews are included as appendices 3 and 4, pp.204-209). This discussion will be followed by further examples of centripetal and centrifugal reading from the other reviews, so that some comparison can then be made with the reviews of MM.

The defining qualities of history as a genre are discussed at some length in J.H. Elliott's article in the New York Review of Books. Elliott sees LED as, in part, Naipaul's personal quest for his own homeland, although he adds that this is not the "selfconscious exploration of the national soul that one might expect of the ordinary expatriate author." He refers to Naipaul as "one of the most sensitive and imaginative novelists writing in the English language today" and LED as "a kind of historical re-creation, which is neither exactly a novel nor exactly history, but which partakes of elements of both." For Elliott, one of the most unusual features of LED is the choice of the second story, of Picton and Luisa Calderon, and its conjunction with the earlier story about Berrio, Ralegh, and the search for El Dorado:

> It is hard to imagine a professional historian ever conceiving of, and still less undertaking, such an apparently hopeless enterprise. . . . But for a novelist the imaginative leaps are more easily made. The themes and motifs which Mr Naipaul handles so sensitively repeat themselves mysteriously.

In the matter of structure, too, Elliott sees differences between Naipaul's approach and that of a professional historian:

> The professional attempts to impose a structure on the inchoate mass of facts. He is concerned with clarity of exposition and with a developing chronological sequence. Mr Naipaul's history is not structural history of this kind but, rather, history by free association.

Thus for Elliott the kind of narrative structure imposed by thematic and motific repetition is insufficient for "proper" historical writing.

Karl Miller, in the Listener, seems to have different criteria. He does not directly address the question of LED's generic status, but he implies that history is essentially the telling of stories. His opening sentence recalls Hayden White's notion of "emplotment": "All stories are sad stories - if you tell them that way." Unlike Elliott, Miller finds no difficulty in the yoking together of two causally unconnected stories, and indeed goes further than Naipaul himself in describing Ralegh's arraignment as a prefiguring of Picton's trial ("It's surprising that Naipaul does not make more of this prefiguring of the Picton affair, for impostures are a substantial element in his subject-matter.") Miller also uses the term "annals" several times, mainly to mean a written record of events which has survived from the past: thus, "slavery is without annals, without individuals." But Miller also considers that Naipaul's book is "valuable simply as annals, as an enhancement of the record. English and Spanish narratives are collated; the history of slavery is co-ordinated with that of the Latin American libertarian movements." Thus the emphasis in this review tends to be on the narrative form in which views of the past are expressed.

Gregory Rabassa, writing in the New York Times Book Review is also concerned with the literary nature of historical writing. LED is "history as literature, meticulously researched and masterfully written, as in the manner of Thucydides" and Naipaul has "not only given us a lesson in history, he has shown us how it is best written." Rabassa refers to Naipaul's earlier nonfictional writings as well as his novels, and notes how "the craft of the novelist" is used in LED. Perhaps more than any of the other reviewers, Rabassa stresses the close connection between history and the novel. He notes that the Picton episode "could well be a novel (or an outline for Thackeray perhaps)" and praises

the treatment of the El Dorado myth in "carefully researched novels by modern writers such as Demetrio Aguilera-Malta (Ecuador) and Arturo Uslar Pietri (Venezuela)." Rabassa approves of Naipaul's use of "the best of the new novel" techniques to give shape to factual material. The conclusion of this review, which relates to Naipaul's deeper purposes as well as technique, deserves full quotation:

> Naipaul has shown that fiction is not necessary to shake the picture of a cruel and barren world out of the cobwebs of tradition, but his careful narrative art is such that we feel what colonialism has done to the New World and we can sense the dark and obverse side of the shining myth.

The anonymous reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement likens LED to a Latin American novel, too. The comparison brings out the extent to which Naipaul is breaking new ground:

> No historian has attempted to weave together in so subtle a manner the threads of the most complex and turbulent period of Caribbean history. For the closest parallel we would have to look at the Cuban Alejo Carpentier's great novel, translated into English as Explosion in a Cathedral . . .

This reviewer has a keen sense of the social purposes of history and hints that conventional historical writing may not be adequate to meet contemporary needs. The following passage arises out of a reference to racial conflict, past and present:

> Attitudes are buried deep in the historical as well as the psychological past and an imperative which socially conscious historians ought not to evade is how to uncover and explain these attitudes. It is a matter of changing historical perspectives, of changing sensibility: cliché has blunted perception and atrocity has become domesticated so that we now need a new style, a new tone, to relate the larger issues to a recognizable experience. In this, The Loss of El Dorado has a valuable contribution to make. To meticulous research is added the novelist's eye for character and situation. The form of the book . . . enables the author to break the tyranny of the usual historical categories.

The relationship between LED and the novel form is seen here not as an accidental spillage from Naipaul's practice as a novelist, but as part of a deliberate attempt to make historical writing more responsive to the social needs of its readers. The review recognizes that in newly

independent countries "history can be a therapeutic exercise", with historians as "the myth-makers of nationalism." LED, however, will not provide much comfort for nationalists, since it finds nothing to glorify; its purpose, rather, is to "decolonize" the European way of looking at the West Indian past. So in this respect, too, the TLS review has much in common with Rabassa's article in the New York Times Book Review.

Hammond Innes in the Spectator also notes LED's "intentional use of the novelist's technique" but here it is used only to "colour and elaborate", making the book a "personalised" rather than academic history. The bulk of Innes' article is devoted to a review of a Hakluyt Society publication, C.R. Boxer's The Portuguese Seaborne Empire; the discussion of LED is much briefer. A comparison of the writers' credentials reveals something of Innes' priorities in assessing historical writing. The Portuguese Seaborne Empire is "the result of forty years' research by this Yale professor, the reading of some 4,000 books and hundreds of manuscripts." Innes acknowledges that "a great deal of research" has also gone into LED, but he sees Naipaul essentially as a novelist writing about Trinidad from a personal point of view. And whereas Professor Boxer has achieved "a remarkable condensation of a very large subject", Naipaul, according to Innes, makes things more confused for his readers:

> even in the minutiae of history people and events are best left to speak for themselves. Viewed in this light, Naipaul the novelist, instead of illuminating his subject, seems to come between the reader and his own assessment of what has been laboriously unearthed.

Innes' ideal of historical writing thus seems to owe more to the Rankean objective of "showing what actually happened" than to E.H. Carr's idea of a "dialogue between present and past."[6]

Presumably one of the reasons for the Spectator inviting Innes to review two historical studies of colonialism was that his own account

of Cortes and Pizarro, The Conquistadors, was also one of the 1969 crop of autumn books. The Conquistadors is reviewed alongside LED in New Stateman. Ronald Bryden devotes most of his article to LED, with just one paragraph at the end commending Innes' book to "those who prefer the old, simple, epic version of American conquest." But for Bryden there is no real comparison between LED and Innes' book: "of irony, complexity, the sense of waste and futility between the epic lines which Naipaul sheds by implication over the whole New World, there's not a thought." Bryden describes LED unequivocally as "a history of the island where we both we born" and predicts that "when the shelf of histories of the Third World's origins has come into existence", LED will take its place alongside works like C.L.R. James's "classic history" of the San Domingo revolution, The Black Jacobins. Bryden's claims for Naipaul's status as an historian are not diluted by any references to his reputation as a novelist. He suggests that, like The Middle Passage and An Area of Darkness, LED may have begun as "yet another quest for a personal past", but MM is the only novel mentioned, and that briefly, for its diagnosis of "the colonial sickness". There is no suggestion in Bryden's article that novelistic techniques are used in LED. Like Rabassa and the TLS reviewer, Bryden sees LED as an antidote to myth, both in the sense of the lost, legendary realms of gold, and of the modern tourist myth, equally seductive and hollow. Naipaul's version of Trinidad's history is presented as authentic (unearthed from British Museum archives) and as having general contemporary relevance ("a study . . . of the grassroots of imperialism").

A rather different view of history as a genre emerges from the final review. The short anonymous piece called "Slave Colony" in the Economist's "Autumn Books" supplement is one of about forty short reviews prefaced by an article on "The Biographical Approach to History." In this article the reader is reminded that "what we call history is a

record of human activites . . . one cannot without extreme prejudice resist the view that it is largely through individuals that history is made." Appropriately enough, "Slave Colony" focuses on the Picton/ Fullarton feud, where there is a clash of personalities as well as of value-systems. History is seen here as the stuff of drama. However, this reviewer differs from most of the others in his/her conception of historical writing: "Professional historians do not have to write readable prose. Professional writers must." It seems that in this case history is not regarded as a literary form, and Naipaul is aligned with "writers" rather than "historians", although no reference is made to his fictional writing.

It is, I hope, clear from these summaries that there are differences in reviewers' ideas of what history should be like as well as in their estimates of how well LED matches up to their expectations of the genre. Centripetal reading for thematic structuring tends to accompany a view of history as a literary art (this is most noticeable in the TLS, Listener and New York Times Book Review articles) but not always (as Elliott's review in the New York Review of Books shows). In order to pursue in more detail the relationship between perception of genre and the shape of response, I shall now look more closely at the New Statesman and Listener reviews.

As I have suggested above, Bryden's review in New Statesman (see appendix 3) makes considerable claims for the status of LED in setting it alongside C.L.R. James's The Black Jacobins. The only other writer referred to is another historian: Bryden compares Naipaul's style in LED with that of Carlyle in his life of Frederick the Great. The choice of anchorage points thus reinforces a particular view of genre. There is also much evidence of centrifugal reading in Bryden's review. His summary of LED's two stories is both strictly chronological in its

order and matter-of-fact in tone. The brief reference to motific repetition seems to lead the reader out to other histories rather than into the structure of this one:

> Naipaul leaves the reader to see the pattern repeating itself in the history of British colonialism: the too-large idealism foundering in the realities of distance, poverty, human greed and pettiness.

Bryden also places LED within a more general context of other histories. The review opens with a reference to the plunder of the Aztec and Inca civilizations which preceded the "third marquisate of New Spain" founded on the El Dorado myth. Later Bryden notes that Naipaul has "assumed in his reader a knowledge of other colonial histories which most western universities are only beginning to wonder whether to prescribe in their syllabuses" (an outline of Bolivar's career, for example, is necessary to bring out "the full irony of Miranda's frustrations in Trinidad"). A rather more personal kind of centrifugal reading emerges from the fact that Bryden, like Naipaul, was born in Trinidad:

> The tropical suburban streets of my childhood named for Picton, Abercrombie, Chacon, take on a sinister new meaning, like the names of those German villages where the concentration camps were discovered. . . .

Thus a sense of a real place as well as a real past is strongly evoked. A sense of the real present is also suggested in the reference to the "poster-coloured tourist mythology" of contemporary Trinidad.

So Bryden's clear-cut acceptance of LED's generic status as history has produced a reading which emphasizes the centrifugal tendency of the narrative.

The final sentence of Miller's review in the Listener (appendix 4) - ". . . all history is the history of cruelty"- implies an equally happy acceptance of LED's generic label, but he seems to see history more as a literary art, and there is correspondingly more emphasis on

centripetal reading. In the opening paragraph Miller puts forward possible objections to the way Naipaul has emplotted the history of Trinidad but suggests "it is hard to deny the strength and authenticity of the vision [LED] contains." The authenticity of a writer's vision can be confirmed by centrifugal reading, but the main drift of Miller's argument seems to be that LED should be judged on the internal coherence it achieves. So whereas Bryden's summary of the narrative's action emphasized continuity and comprehensiveness ("After Raleigh's failure, the dream waned for 200 years" . . . "Naipaul's second story, the only other occasion when Trinidad's history almost impinged upon that of the world" . . . "In the two centuries since Raleigh's last voyage . . .") Miller draws attention to selection:

> Naipaul has chosen to recount a small number of episodes, so that the Caribbean darkness which is in part the darkness of slavery, in part the darkness of dereliction and remoteness, is intensely lit at important times.

Miller also emphasizes thematic repetition: I have already quoted his comments on the Picton affair being pre-figured in Ralegh's arraignment, but he takes the parallels further still: "The resemblances between the two episodes run deep: there was a streak of Miranda - another impostor - in sweet Sir Walter." Miller sees imposture both as "a substantial element" in LED's subject-matter, and as a prominent theme in Naipaul's fiction. The link to Naipaul's fictional writing is made firstly through reference to The Mystic Masseur and The Mimic Men, and then through a claim that part of the value of LED resides in its "recapitulation, in various new keys, of the established themes of Naipaul's fiction." Miller is not, like some of the other reviewers, linking Naipaul's fiction and nonfiction by virtue of shared techniques, but sees a more fundamental connection in the shared themes of imposture, illusion and cruelty. Centripetal reading thus opens up new perceptions of the integrated nature of Naipaul's work. (Miller's readiness to link history with other

literary genres is also apparent in his quoting six lines of "The Conclusion" to illustrate the point that "the annals of El Dorado move to the rhythm of Ralegh's most melancholy poems.") However, the prominence of literary anchorage points and centripetal reading in Miller's review does not mean that the centrifugal impulse in reading has been entirely suppressed. At the beginning of the article he puts forward the possibility that far from being an inconsequential place, Trinidad, "with its race relations and slavery and wildcat commerce", may have influenced British society decisively. Then towards the end of the review Miller also challenges those critics who accuse Naipaul of fastidious reluctance "to seek out precursors among his characters for the libertarians of Black Power and of the newly independent African nations." To be sure, these are rather oblique references to the contemporary relevance of LED, but there is more direct evidence of centrifugal reading in the claim that LED "is valuable simply as annals, as an enhancement of the record." Thus, for all their differences, Miller and Bryden both see LED taking its place alongside other histories of the West Indies.

To a large extent, then, these two reviews represent opposing tendencies in reading, but there is common ground between them because Miller's version of LED gives some scope to the centrifugal impulse as well as the centripetal. There are other reviewers besides Miller who bring centripetal reading to the fore. Rabassa, for example, notes that the narrative is "woven together and permeated by the theme implicit in the book's title", and Elliott also comments on the "recurring theme of El Dorado" which means so many different things to different participants in the story. Another point to be noted in Elliott's review concerns the book's structure:

> Parallels and antitheses constantly suggest themselves, like the differences and similarities between the English and

> Spanish temperaments, as represented by Raleigh and Berrio, Picton and the revolutionary conspirator, Miranda.

The Economist's reviewer links characters in a different combination, but the same analytical principle is at work: "Miranda, the lifelong revolutionary who failed to make his revolution, is the heir of Raleigh, the inept amateur explorer who failed to find his gold." On the whole, though, the LED reviews make more consistent use of centrifugal reading than the MM reviews, and this can be seen in two main ways. Firstly, LED is frequently seen in relation to other documents dealing with this particular stretch of the real past. In addition to the references by Miller and Bryden to "the annals" of the period and "the shelf of the histories of the Third World's origins," Rabassa describes Naipaul as "redressing certain lacks he has found in colonial chroniclers", Innes likens LED to a book on New Granada written by Juan Rodriguez Freile in the fifteenth century, and the TLS reviewer refers to Naipaul's sources in the Venezuelan Boundary Arbitration Papers in the British Museum. Even Elliott's rather whimsical opening, quoting a verse on tobacco and "Trinidado" written by Thomas Weelkes in 1608, and going on to mention Raleigh's book, The Discoverie of the Large and Bewtiful Empire of Guiana, links the first section of LED with source materials from the age of exploration. The second kind of centrifugal reading relates LED to the conflicts and upheavals of the present. This approach is particularly prominent in the opening of Rabassa's article:

> As the uprising of black-power dissidents against the government of Eric Williams takes place and puzzles outsiders, this deeply foreboding book on the early years of Trinidad . . . becomes all the more revealing.

I have already mentioned the TLS reviewer's emphasis on the social functions of historical writing [pp.120-21 above]; the sentence "Race, as we now know to our cost, is not simple" shows that this is not merely a theoretical interest. An earlier passage in the review brings

out the contemporary relevance of Naipaul's work:

> . . . the Caribbean . . . impinges on our consciousness as rarely before; Enoch Powell and Cuba have seen to that. One value of Mr Naipaul's book is that it sharpens the focus once again on the Caribbean; not on the sun-drenched beaches of the bingo prize but on what James Pope-Hennessy has called the "sunless and fungoid region" of our past.

There are, however, no contemporary references in the shorter reviews of LED (Spectator, Economist) or in Elliott's New York Review of Books article.

Overall, it appears that the reviews of both books provide evidence of centripetal and centrifugal reading. The reviews of LED suggest that centripetal reading can be very useful in discussing the structure of a nonfictional narrative, but the centripetal tendency is more marked in the MM reviews. Conversely, centrifugal reading is a more consistent feature of the LED reviews, although reviewers of MM seem just as likely to bring out the contemporary relevance of their text, even if they do not foreground this element quite so prominently. Choice of anchorage points and (in the case of LED) expectations of genre seem to have affected the shape of response in several of the reviews. It may be, however, that some of these differences are attributable to the fact that different reviewers have different reading backgrounds and critical approaches (and this would apply to fiction-reviewers as a body compared with reviewers of nonfiction). In chapter 6 there will be opportunities to pursue this inquiry a stage further and compare the same reader's response to different kinds of narrative.

CHAPTER 6: THE MIMIC MEN AND THE LOSS OF EL DORADO (3):

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

The reviewers whose readings of MM and LED have just been discussed can be seen as members of a literary establishment which is, for the most part, different from that to which academic critics belong, although there is some overlap between the two. The critical books on Naipaul to be discussed in this chapter do not reach such a wide readership as the reviews do, but because of the way they affect the teaching of Naipaul's work in educational insitutions their long-term influence is probably greater. So the readings of Naipaul's work analysed here continue the project of looking at these texts from the angle of different kinds of reader, using a theory of centrifugal and centripetal impulses; but at the same time I am mindful that these particular readings have extra significance because they proceed from a literary establishment which helps to shape reading conventions.

In this chapter, then, there will be an opportunity to address a further set of questions concerning literary criticism as an institution, and particular pieces of literary criticism in relation to the living life of the text on which they are based. These questions have been raised by Edward Said in The World, the Text and the Critic, and two quotations from his book should help to locate the issues. In the first place, Said argues that criticism is not an outdated and secondary activity, but another aspect of the text's "social discursive presence in the world":

> In other words, rather than being defined by the silent past, commanded by it to speak in the present, criticism, no less than any text, is the present in the course of its articulation, its struggles for definition. 1

Clearly the critical perspective on Naipaul's work is pretty short, as critical perspectives go. But differences emerge between the earlier and later studies in this chapter, and I believe that the critical

positions taken in these studies offer some scope for discussion of Said's claim. More importantly, given the nature of Naipaul's preoccupations as a writer, the academic criticism considered in this chapter can also be used to test Said's assertion that specialized professional criticism chiefly serves (and helps to preserve) the dominant culture:

> In that relatively untroubled and secluded world [of academic literary criticism] there seems to be no contact with the world of events and societies, which modern history, intellectuals, and critics have in fact built. Instead, contemporary criticism is an institution for publicly affirming the values of our, that is European dominant élite culture, and for privately setting loose the unrestrained interpretation of a universe defined in advance as the endless misreading of a misinterpretation. 2

I shall be asking how far Naipaul's critics comply with the values and standards of the dominant culture, and how far they recognize the oppositional stance in his writings. This will involve more extensive discussion of an issue which was touched on in chapter 5, concerning the extent to which Naipaul's work is seen in the context of "Commonwealth literature".

Alongside these broader questions about literary criticism as an institution, I want to pursue some lines of inquiry begun in chapters 4 and 5, although differences in the nature of the data will again need to be taken into account. The informants featured in chapter 4 were able to offer more or less immediate responses to the two texts, so the dynamics of the reading process could still be glimpsed in their comments. The reviews studied in chapter 5 represented a more considered response, which had probably taken shape over several weeks or months, and in the context of a longer acquaintance with Naipaul's work. In the case of literary critics writing about MM and LED the gestation period extends to many years, during which the texts will have been re-read, wholly or partially, perhaps many times, and these

re-readings are now fitted into an overall argument about Naipaul's achievements. This data, then, will offer little direct evidence about the dynamics of reading, but it will certainly be appropriate to ask, as with the reviewers and non-professional readers, how far expectations about genre affect response. I expect to find more extensive evidence of centripetal reading in the writings of professional literary critics, but will there be differences between analyses of the fictional and the nonfictional text in this respect? It may also be possible to use the notion of collective "anchorage points" in order to identify the members of different interpretive communities.

The materials for this chapter consist of six book-length studies and one pamphlet on Naipaul's work, listed in table 3 overleaf. I have excluded critiques such as Kerry McSweeney's in Four Contemporary Novelists where the emphasis is avowedly on Naipaul as a writer of fiction rather than nonfiction. Although I shall be concentrating on the critics' treatment of MM and LED, it has to be remembered that these studies are concerned with the whole of Naipaul's output and his evolution as a writer, so they tend to stress links between different works.

Another important point to bear in mind is that the overall balance of Naipaul's work has altered since the first batch of critics published their studies in the 1970s. In 1971 Naipaul had produced only three works of nonfiction (The Middle Passage, An Area of Darkness and LED) but eight volumes of fiction. By the mid 1980s the two strands in his work were much more evenly balanced, with only two more novels (Guerrillas and A Bend in the River) to add on the fiction side, but a whole crop of travel books, collections of articles and "documentary writing" to boost the nonfiction tally. Even so, comparison of the amount of space devoted to MM and LED respectively reveals marked

TABLE 3: CRITICAL STUDIES OF NAIPAUL'S WORK

1972	Paul Theroux	V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction to his Work (London) 144 pp.
1973	R.D. Hamner	V.S. Naipaul (New York) 181 pp.
1973	William Walsh	V.S. Naipaul (Edinburgh) 94 pp.
1975	Landeg White	V.S. Naipaul: a Critical Introduction (London) 215 pp.
1975	Michael Thorpe	V.S. Naipaul (pamphlet published for the British Council) (London) 44 pp.
1987	Margaret Nightingale	Journey through Darkness: the Writing of V.S. Naipaul (Queensland) 255 pp.
1988	Peter Hughes	V.S. Naipaul (London) 114 pp.

differences between critic and critic. Theroux (1972) and Nightingale (1987) spend almost as long discussing LED as they do MM, but all the others devote considerably less space to the history book (Walsh's ratio might be taken as the median: ten pages is spent on MM, less than three on LED). So in the sample considered here, there is no direct relationship between the increasing volume of nonfiction in Naipaul's output and the amount of critical space devoted to it. But, as we shall see, the two 1980s critics tend to attach more importance to the non-fictional writings.

Some of the 1970s critics do, however, recognize the close relation-

ship between Naipaul's fictional and nonfictional writing. Hamner notes in his opening chapter that in most of Naipaul's work

> fact and fiction are drawn in close proximity. Not surprisingly, the overall fictional picture largely complements the more direct one of the nonfictional books. In effect, Naipaul submits two parallel views, both equally accurate, of the same reality; and penetrating insights are available from each perspective. Caution must be observed, however, despite the temptation to transfer his discursive judgements to the semiautobiographical but imaginative world of fiction. Naipaul himself was concerned about the consequences of confusing actual with created realities in close proximity. [Part of the foreword to The Middle Passage is quoted.] 3

White, writing in 1975, employs with some self-mockery the "grocer's attitude to literature" scorned by Naipaul, comparing his fictional and nonfictional output by bulk and asking, with reference to the nonfiction, "why such a distinguished novelist should dissipate his energies in this way." In the case of MM and LED, he sees the historical account as "in a sense a supplement to The Mimic Men, reinforcing Kripalsingh's displacement with an academic and fully documented version of the same themes . . . It could only have followed the novel."[4] However, much of Naipaul's later nonfictional writing does not fit into this "supplementary" role, but instead provides the seedbed from which fictional writing grows (see the Author's Note in The Return of Eva Peron). Perhaps there is more truth in White's earlier suggestion that Naipaul moves easily between fictional and nonfictional writing because "on the whole his is a shaping rather than an inventive imagination."[5] Walsh, too, seeks to pin down the cast of mind which is common to Naipaul the novelist and Naipaul the travel-writer and historian; he describes Naipaul as having "the telescopic sight of the unattached observer who is not only a creative observer, even an observer of genius, but one in whom observation feeds reflection and one in whom the observation of others leads to analysis of self."[6] Walsh attributes Naipaul's success in the travel books to his "not allowing the discursive method to completely oust the

novelist's habit",[7] and discerns "a mature novelist's skill" in the design of LED,[8] but otherwise has little to say of the relationship between the fiction and nonfiction. Theroux, who, as we shall see, takes a very determined line on the status of LED as a piece of scholarly historical writing, seems inclined elsewhere in his book to include the travel-writing within Naipaul's achievements as a novelist. The Middle Passage is, according to Theroux, an unsatisfactory book, "the book of a man learning how to write about travel, its shape is that of an itinerary", whereas An Area of Darkness is a "master-piece of travel-writing"[9] whose two subjects (India and Naipaul himself) are interwoven in a progression which is "simultaneous and linked, like the main plot and the subplot of a novel, and with the same compelling force of a novel."[10] Thorpe also finds An Area of Darkness "in some respects novelistic. The author plays the engaged narrator, provides setting, commentary and interpretation, but allows character and action sufficient play to permit a many-sided impression of his subject to emerge."[11] In general, then, Thorpe, Walsh and Theroux are concerned to find traces of the novelist in Naipaul's nonfictional writing. Hamner and White are more interested in the interplay between fiction and nonfiction, so arguably give more weight to the nonfictional works in their own right (with the important exception of Theroux on LED). But they do not go nearly as far in this direction as Nightingale and Hughes, the two critics from the 1980s.

Nightingale's introduction sets out clearly the importance of studying the two strands in Naipaul's writing alongside each other:

> V.S. Naipaul's nonfiction explicitly states the reasons for the rootlessness, corruption and violence which he believes characterize modern existence. The inter-relationship between Naipaul's studies of various societies and his attempt to come to terms with what he sees through fictional writing is one of the central concerns of this book. But this is not a one-way process: Naipaul's nonfictional writing is shaped by his novelist's techniques. While the nonfiction frequently defines the attitudes and investigates the situations that later become the major themes and elements of plots of Naipaul's fiction,

> the nonfiction itself is often, if less obviously, shaped by the fiction which precedes it. 12

This recognition is essential, Nightingale argues, if the reader is to approach those deeper and pervasive themes in Naipaul's work concerning perceptions of reality:

> When considered together, Naipaul's fiction and nonfiction provide a very profound statement of the inter-relation of fact and fiction, of the existence of an element of fantasy in many views of reality. 13

In the section of her book on LED, Nightingale takes this point a stage further, with reference to written records: "In deflating romantic legends which have become 'history', Naipaul suggests that the distinction between fact and fiction, history and fantasy is frequently vague."[14] Throughout the book, Nightingale attends to the development of Naipaul's insight into this problem, and the final distinctions she arrives at include two differing concepts of fiction: the kind written by Naipaul which processes and reveals experience, and the kind eschewed by Naipaul which cloaks experience in fantasy. All Naipaul's writing, she claims, sets rationality against fantasy:

> In his nonfiction Naipaul attempts to use reason to discover the patterns of experience, the cause and effect relationship between past, present and future events. In his fiction he portrays the dilemma of the individual in a world his observations lead him to believe is disintegrating into chaos and violence. And yet the order in his writing in itself seems to suggest a positive, a cause for hope in the middle of chaos. 15

A similar point is made by Hughes (1988), who characterizes Naipaul's vision of the contemporary world as "a world undoing itself" (chapter 1), in the midst of which his writing

> ravels up a counterpoised and ordered pattern or vision. Naipaul, for all the traditionalism of his early fiction, has since become in all his work a writer who does what the great modernists do: he makes good through style what has been lost by history. 16

"Making good through style" applies not only to Naipaul's fiction but also to the nonfiction and (latest addition to Naipaul's list of publications) the generically problematic The Enigma of Arrival. Hughes goes

further than any of the other critics in setting fiction and nonfiction alongside each other; in fact, he wants to explode the boundary between them:

> In the new reality conveyed by Naipaul's writing, literature transcends distinctions between fiction and nonfiction to become once again what it was in the time of Gibbon and Johnson, and what it may become again: all writing of quality with a claim to permanence. 17

This bold statement could be seen as evidence of recent changes in the interpretive conventions governing the reading of fiction and nonfiction. In chapter 1 I noted the proliferation, since the 1960s, of writing "between the genres" and referred to critical studies, such as those by Hollowell and Zavarzadeh, focused on one highly visible part of this territory, the "nonfiction novel"; Zavarzadeh in particular challenges the restrictive taxonomy of literary theories which work on a strict separation between "fact" and "fiction", because they fail to account for (and thus often ignore) writings which do not fit comfortably into either slot. However, it seems that in the approaches taken by Nightingale and, especially, Hughes with regard to Naipaul's work there is evidence of interpretive conventions changing to the extent that this sharp division between fiction and nonfiction is no longer seen as being of fundamental importance; these critics give more prominence to the convergence of different kinds of writing in Naipaul, and thus undermine the polarity of traditional categories. This new critical attitude towards nonfictional writing emerging in the 1980s seems, then, to support Said's description of criticism as "the present in the course of its articulation."

In fact, this shift in perceptions of nonfictional writing is probably the most noticeable change between the critical studies of the '70s and those of the '80s, and, as I suggested earlier, it is no doubt related to the changing fiction/nonfiction balance in Naipaul's output.

The other major change in his writing since the 1970s is that it has become more global in its concerns, and this may affect the extent to which different interpretive communities have taken up and assessed his work. For the moment, though, I want to stay with the question of genres in order to make some comparisons between selected critics. The question to be addressed here is: "How far do the critic's expectations about the genre of a work affect the shape of his/her response?" The key text in this respect is LED, since, as we saw in chapter 5, descriptions of its genre differ considerably. The critic who takes the most unequivocal line on the status of LED as a piece of scholarly historical writing is Theroux, who claims that "its appearance would have established Naipaul as a great historian if he had not already been established as a great novelist"; he recognizes that LED has "much in common with Naipaul's novels", but insists on its autonomy as "an intentionally factual and scholarly work."[18] White, too, emphasizes LED's importance as an "illuminating and carefully researched history."[19] Thorpe, Nightingale and Hughes all recognize the scholarly basis of the work, but qualify their descriptions somewhat. Thorpe refers to the book's "fictional effects,"[20] and Hughes calls it a "visionary history."[21] Nightingale pays tribute to the impressively thorough research which has gone into the book, but considers it

> a rather personal version of Trinidad's history, closer perhaps to Naipaul's journalism than to conventional scholarly texts or perhaps comparable to Shakespeare's manipulation of historical facts to prove the divine rule of kings. 22

Hamner and Walsh are the most doubtful about LED's status as historical writing. Walsh remarks that "the material of LED is historical, but the treatment is both imaginative and analytical, more a function of the exercise of the sensibility than of any strictly historical faculty."[23] For Hamner it is "history as fine art rather than history as an academic discipline," a "hybrid" book, a "novelist's history."[24] So for the

purposes of more detailed comparison I have selected Hamner's account of LED to set against Theroux's, in order to examine the relationship between genre-description and response.

As I mentioned earlier, Theroux devotes almost as much space to discussing LED as he does to MM; Hamner deals with LED in less than four pages, whereas MM receives about twelve pages of analysis (both critics, of course, make passing reference to the two works outside the sections of detailed discussion I am dealing with here, although Hamner refers to LED only once more). More interesting, though, is the placing of these sections. Theroux's treatment of Naipaul's novels depends on grouping by character and theme across several chapters; so, for example, there are substantial passages on MM under the headings of "Creators" (chapter 1) and "Householders" (chapter 3). LED, however, is treated differently: after a short linking passage dealing with the theme of history in MM, the bulk of chapter 5, "A Sense of the Past", is devoted to LED. In contrast, Hamner places his critique of LED in his opening chapter, "West Indian Milieu", alongside the other "discursive works", The Middle Passage and An Area of Darkness; Naipaul's short stories are also tucked into this rather miscellaneous chapter, before Hamner launches into his five-chapter analysis of the novels. In Hamner's scheme, then, LED assumes to some extent a "background" status, whereas Theroux separates it from Naipaul's other nonfictional writing and foregrounds its generic distinctness.

There are also some marked differences in the content of the two critiques. Both critics isolate what they see as the themes of LED, but Hamner's version is couched in very general and personal terms which make it sound more applicable to a novel than to an historical work:

> The theme dominating this complex history is relatively simple and may be described as "man's futile attempts to grasp the illusions of his own fantasy." 25

Theroux's version of "theme" deals in abstractions, too, but it also contains specific political references which underline LED's relationship with the world of events and the formation of societies:

> [LED] deals with attempts at creation, uprooted individuals, the effects of myth, dependency and exile, the metropolitan becoming a colonial, cultures opening and closing, the contradictions of freedom, the ironies of liberalism, the origins of black power, the colonial simplicity and brutality, the taste of the deprived and the derelict for fantasy. 26

Similar emphases are revealed in the concluding assessments of each critic. Hamner's final statement about LED is: "Naipaul the novelist stresses the human element in his history, just as he has in his travels",[27] whereas Theroux's section on LED ends with: "it explains Black Power in Trinidad by describing the real origins of the Carnival, those 'kingdoms of the night' that were exposed in 1805."[28]

Given that Hamner is more disposed to see LED in fictive terms, we might expect to find more evidence of centripetal reading in his account of the book. Like the other critics, Hamner refers to LED's "pattern of events", but he has rather more to say about this than Theroux does. Theroux's comments on patterning are confined to the "natural link" between Naipaul's two stories, the search for El Dorado, and the futile attempts to set going a South American revolution from Trinidad: "one story reinforced the other and both stories give shape to the present: LED is the prologue to The Middle Passage."[29] Theroux is concerned not so much with the aesthetic as with the explanatory effects of the book's patterning. Hamner, on the other hand, sees the style of Naipaul's prose also beginning to establish a pattern:

> Interconnecting and woven throughout the two central episodes in the history there is a complex tracing of minor threads, events and people of striking similarity, that merge and drop away only to reappear again. The general effect is like that of an intricate and varied but thematically unified tapestry. 30

Perhaps it is also significant that Hamner remarks on the use of

prolepsis in LED's prologue: "Even before entering on the body of the text, Naipaul thus reveals the end of the narrative he is about to begin."[31] I can find no comparable comments on either the texture of LED or its narrative trajectory in Theroux's much longer and in other respects more detailed critique, so this does suggest that Hamner, describing LED as a "novelist's history", is more inclined to centripetal reading than is Theroux.

It is possible, of course, that the differences between the two critics' readings of LED are attributable to variations in individual reading practices rather than the concept of genre each has chosen to work within. However, if we compare Hamner's critique of MM with Theroux's, we should be able to gauge the extent to which individual differences need to be taken into account, since in this case there are no complications about genre. Certainly, one notices striking contrasts in the two critics' accounts of the novel. Although they both take issue with those reviewers who considered MM limited by the restricted viewpoint of its narrator,[32] they themselves present very different pictures of the central character. To Theroux Ralph Singh is a creator who, by recreating his life in the shape of his memoir, imposes an order on it and "becomes a whole man;" his retirement at the end of the novel is temporary, "like the novelist's idleness between novels."[33] Hamner, on the other hand, sees Singh as a true representative of "the mimic men . . . apparently exhausted by the absurdity that plagues them";[34] at the end of the novel

> the protagonist asserts his will to continue, but the existence he envisions for himself is a barren void - no love, no hope, no ideals, none of the spiritual or emotional essentials that make a human being more than an automaton. 35

But Hamner argues that the novel itself is not thereby rendered negative:

the apparent objections can be resolved by making a clear distinction between the narrator's voice and the author's. Theroux, in my view,

underplays the ironic distance between Naipaul and his narrator and thus has to attribute the novel's positive qualities more directly to Singh himself. This is the most noticeable difference in the two accounts of MM and although it is a critical difference as far as interpretation of novel is concerned, it is not necessarily significant as far as these two critics' reading of nonfiction is concerned, since it is confined to the specific problems raised in first-person narration. What would be more significant would be marked preferences in either case for centripetal reading, and in this respect I can find fewer differences. Here, for example, is Theroux's comment on the structure of MM:

> The memoir is not chronological. The order in it is Singh's own, it is deliberate. . . . His experience was overwhelmingly formless: the novel's pattern is amazingly balanced, remembrance playing upon remembrance, extending and dilating experience, skilfully repeating and reviewing incidents and recalled phrases. It is dense and complex, but it resembles less a solid chunk of a man's history than an elaborate circling filigree of memory, crossing and recrossing. 36

Hamner, too, dwells on the novel's intricate structure:

> Naipaul uses, as a Times Literary Supplement reviewer terms it, what is not so much a flashback as a "dissolving" technique. Not only episodes but huge sections of The Mimic Men are taken out of chronological order and related according to the sequence imposed by the narrator's wandering memories. The manipulations of time are handled with such ease - what with moods and images carried back and forth - that continuity never falters, and the fluctuating dreaminess of the narrator's mental state only adds to the blending and mixing of realism and fantasy. 37

There are many similarities of emphasis between these two passages: on large-scale disruptions of chronology (some of the other critics refer only to the novel's action "flitting back and forth between present and past"[38]); on the delicate effects thus created ("elaborate circling filigree of memory" and "fluctuating dreaminess of the narrator's mental state"); and, most importantly, on the use of repeated images and phrases to connect various sections of the novel. Hamner later extends his analysis of thematic motifs:

> There are too many such examples of the affinity between mental

> state and setting in MM to detail them all, but they include innumerable references to Ralph Singh's deeply rooted preferences for mountains and snow as opposed to his native elements, sand and sea. Out of his island environment he is also (appropriately) obsessed by images of ships and shipwrecks; and closely associated with his experiences in England is his sensitivity to the shades of light . . . 39

Theroux is less explicit about the function of such motifs in the narrative, but he draws attention to similar recurring details in describing the particular flavour of Singh's imaginings and self-projections:

> He is a child weeping outside a hut at dusk, he is a Central Asian horseman "rising below a sky threatening snow to the very end of an empty world." He is the last survivor of the colonial shipwreck . . . Singh's vision is one of disorder, the flotsam of the shipwreck, the smallness and meanness of the place . . . 40

The clustering of recurring and potent images here provides some close parallels with Hamner's more analytical account of thematic motifs (shades of light, snow and shipwreck). Both critics, then, engage in centripetal reading of MM which relies upon displacement of similar, and in some cases identical elements of imagery and pattern. This being so, the differences in their reading of LED can hardly be attributed solely to individual reading biases; they must be related to perceptions of genre.

My findings with regard to these disparate approaches to LED are obviously very localized: I chose to compare Hamner with Theroux mainly because their initial descriptions of genre offered the clearest possibilities for contrast, but also because the two studies are comparable in date and scope. Had I chosen, for example, Nightingale's extremely full critique of LED to set alongside any of the earlier studies, her reflections on the development of Naipaul's theory and references to his later writings would have had to have been taken into account as well. In addition, Nightingale compares Naipaul's version of characters and events in LED with those of other histo-

rians,[41] thus adding another dimension to the analysis. But even given these added complexities, the overall balance of centripetal and centrifugal reading in her account of LED tends to confirm the projection one might make on the basis of her qualified acceptance of LED as historical writing. So whilst I have presented the Hamner/Theroux contrast as a particularly clear-cut case, the conclusion that perceptions of genre affect the shape of response would, I believe, hold good for other versions of LED, too.

So far, then, formal considerations relating to genre have accounted for the differences between critic and critic. In the remainder of this chapter I want to address Said's claim that professional literary criticism serves the dominant culture. In order to do this it will be necessary to establish other differentiating criteria between critics, and here the concept of anchorage points will play an important part in the analysis.

In chapter 2 I referred to Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities that "produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features." Ways of reading, according to Fish, are not "correct" or "natural", but extensions of community perspectives.[42] The burden of Said's argument is that Western critics, as an interpretive community, have put limits around an acceptable range of textual meanings which will preserve and further a Eurocentric world-view in which "what is ours is good."[43] But, as Said notes, times are changing, not least in

> the diminishing acquiescence and deference accorded to what has been called the Natopolitan world long dominating peripheral regions like Africa, Asia, and Latin America. New cultures, new societies, and emerging visions of social, political and aesthetic order now lay claim to the humanist's attention, with an insistence that cannot be denied. 44

Certainly, as "English literature" gives way to "literatures in English"

the emergence of alternative world-views gathers pace, and readers and

critics have to be ready to change or suspend conventional assumptions as the cultural boundaries of their reading widen. But this is not quite the point at issue in discussing critical responses to Naipaul's work. Because he is, like the narrator of "One out of Many", "a citizen of the world", his writings have attracted critical response from all quarters of the globe. Walsh, for example, concludes his critical study of Naipaul with an "Album of Response" which includes commentary from Indian and West Indian critics as well as the more accessible British and European evaluations. In a sense Naipaul's work "belongs to" non-European as well as European society because of its global concerns, but I would go further than this and argue that his writing provides an especially good test of Western criticism because it embodies oppositional rather than alternative values. As this thesis has not so far been concerned with the exact nature of the challenge Naipaul offers to Western values, some important general points need to be established before I go on to consider the seven critics' readings of MM and LED in this context.

The political dimension in Naipaul's work is inescapable, and Gāmino Salgādo in his essay "V.S. Naipaul and the Politics of Fiction" neatly summarizes the reasons for this:

> No writer from the third world can avoid being political in a fairly narrow sense of the term, especially if he is writing in English. His subject matter, however "domestically" or "privately" focused, will almost certainly involve direct reference to far-reaching political, economic and social changes. His very choice of language and medium has political implications and his intended audience is likely to be the English and American reader. Naipaul has never shown any reluctance to avoid this confrontation. 45

Arguably the most consistent feature in Naipaul's writing, from the political and cultural point of view, is rejection. To begin with, his early novels aroused hostility among some of his fellow-Trinidadians because they apparently ridiculed West Indians; here, for example, is

George Lamming's often-quoted comment of 1960:

> His books can't move beyond a castrated satire; and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work, comparable to Selvon's, can rest safely on satire alone. When such a writer is a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a "superior" culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge. 46

Less severe West Indian critics have shared with Lamming a conviction that Naipaul's rejection of the West Indies implies in its place an allegiance to British culture:

> Naipaul is an excellent writer in the British tradition, who to a large extent has used West Indian subject matter, often treated critically through irony and satire, but who rejects the West Indies and becomes almost comically indignant if anyone calls him a West Indian novelist . . . 47

Rejection of the West Indies in Naipaul's early novels includes, of course, rejection of the transplanted Indian, Hindu society he grew up in. An Area of Darkness extended this rejection to the Indian sub-continent itself and offended many Indian critics. Walsh quotes a comparatively calm response to An Area of Darkness by Prema Nandakumar:

> His. . . visit to India . . . was an even more shattering experience. What he saw - or chose to see - was not what he expected to see, and he became sullen, he felt disillusioned. Poor India had not come up to his expectations (what exactly were they?), and he felt no hesitation in saying so in so many words. He had missed the simple fact that India was not Trinidad, nor England for that matter. 48

Again, there is a hint that Naipaul's allegiances, if not here, must be elsewhere. But Naipaul's capacity for criticism is not confined to the cultures of his own complex background; his restless journeyings have brought ever more diverse cultures within his critical gaze, and provoked counter-attacks from those whose cultures he criticises. In an essay of 1985 Adewale Maja-Pearce accused both V.S. Naipaul and his brother Shiva of contemptuously dismissing Africa and its traditions: instead "they slavishly worship an alien [Western] tradition which they have adopted wholesale and which they use to measure everything which falls outside

it."[49] And Edward Said himself attacks Naipaul's view of the world of Islam in Among the Believers, a view which reveals "an unexamined reverence for the colonial order," according to Said; Naipaul, "a kind of belated Kipling", likes to

> align things under the Islam/West polarity. Conversation made in a Kuala Lumpur hotel in the company of two young Muslims and a book left by one of them with Naipaul, are suddenly instances of "Islam" (uncritical, uncreative) and the "West" (creative, critical). 50

So, how much truth is there in the argument that Naipaul has assimilated Western values and uses them as a yardstick against which to measure other cultures (which are usually found to be unsatisfactory in some respect or other)? Certainly the early novels up to and including A House for Mr Biswas present a favourable view of England, and London in particular, as a place of escape, a distant El Dorado for disaffected West Indians. But as Naipaul's viewpoint widens, he also becomes more critical of Western society. He takes a long historical view, and, like Conrad's Marlow, is mindful of the fact that London "has also been one of the dark places of the earth."[51] In A Bend in the River, which contains many echoes of "Heart of Darkness", contemporary London is no longer a place of refuge; Nazruddin, superstitious about the number of Arabs he sees on the streets of London, says,

> "I can't help feeling that when they leave Arabia terrible things are about to happen in the world. You just have to think of where we came from. Persia, India, Africa. Think of what happened there. Now Europe." 52

Earlier, Naipaul had created a hostile and violent setting for the narrator of "Tell Me Who to Kill", and even in the first of his non-Caribbean novels, Mr Stone and the Knights Companion, the sadly comic evocation of suburbia contained hints of alienation as well as emptiness. A deep-seated sense of the "otherness" of English life also forms part of the consciousness of the narrator of The Enigma of Arrival, who speaks of "the homelessness, the drifting about, I had imposed on myself."[53] Whether or

not Naipaul's own homelessness is self-imposed, his condition can aptly be described as one of radical exile, with layers of alienation superimposed on each other. There is evidence both in MM and LED that this sense of alienation includes criticism of the distortions inherent in the Eurocentric world-view, and especially of Western history's misrepresentation of the colonial past.

In LED the challenge to the European view of history is most evident. Naipaul's purpose is not only to tell "two forgotten stories", to fill up an absence in the historical record, but also to expose the supposed normality of the conventional story. This is explicit in his references to two of the major British figures involved, Ralegh and Picton. In the Foreword he refers to Ralegh's attempt on the "gold-mines" of Guiana in 1617 and a subsequent document which mentions an Indian people called Chaguanes:

> People who write about Ralegh usually have to hurry back with him to the Tower of London; they pay as little attention as Ralegh himself to what was left behind. An obscure part of the New World is momentarily touched by history, the darkness closes up again; the Chaguanes disappear in silence. 54

The career of Thomas Picton, the first British Governor of Trinidad, offers an even sharper illustration of Western distortion, because after his infamous rule in Trinidad, culminating in trial on a charge of torture, Picton became involved in great European events, and died a hero's death at Waterloo. Naipaul comments:

> The military glory Picton aimed at and achieved could not last. It lay in personal valour . . . The reputation of Picton and others was to be absorbed in Wellington's more complex, nation-building myth. Picton's glory abolished his disgrace; when the glory went, the man and his disgrace were forgotten. 55

A different approach to the distorting effects of the literature of conquest can be seen in Naipaul's accounts of the Spanish and English "possession rites" in sixteenth-century Trinidad. Staying close to the wording of his source documents (from the Venezuelan Boundary Arbitra-

tion Papers for the Spanish records, and Hakluyt Society publications for the English) he describes these histrionic rites in minute, deflating detail. In the account of the Spaniard Vera's "possession" of Cumucurape (now part of Port of Spain), the absence of resistance becomes a virtual though unspoken presence. After raising a cross fashioned from a forty-foot tree and marking out a small square beside it, Vera drew his sword and said:

> "I take possession by turf and twig" . . . The notary said he had witnessed the act of possession. . . . Vera called Guanaguanare and his Indians together and told them he had taken them over in the name of the King of Spain and was going to instruct them in the Catholic faith. The notary thought the Indians "rejoiced". 56

Naipaul gives a similarly detailed description of the empty pomp of a later English "service" in which Robert Dudley claimed the island for Queen Elizabeth, but this time he picks up incidental references to a suddenly empty Indian village to make clear what is missing from his narrative source, Captain Wyatt's Journal:

> The seething supper, the war-pipes in the night, the empty houses and the cooking-bowls: it is as close as we will get to Indian life. When next these high woods are visited by someone open to the natural world - Charles Kingsley, in 1868 - these Indian villages . . . will have disappeared. It is the absence of the Indians that distorts the time-scale in these parts of the Indies. Dudley's adventure, which Wyatt's narrative brings so close, can also appear, and only partly in the manner intended by Wyatt, to be set in a land of myth, part of the historical night. 57

I hope these few examples will be sufficient to show that Naipaul's consciousness of the omissions and distortions of the conventional version of West Indian history forms part of the fabric of LED. Some of the book's reviewers referred to in chapter 5 were certainly aware of this. The conclusion of Rabassa's review in the New York Times Book Review [quoted on p.120 above] brings out clearly the contrast between the "shining myth" of tradition and the dark reality of colonialism. In similar vein, Bryden's review in New Statesman describes LED as a study of

> the grassroots of imperialism: of what life was like in those colossal, neglected tracts of colonial tissue between imperialism's epics, the El Dorados which paid off. . . . The clincher to Naipaul's argument about what went wrong with the island where we both grew up is that most of his book will be new and startling to Trinidadians. The island history of cruelty, degradation and hypocrisy has been raked over, buried in the British Museum archives where he found it, replaced with a poster-coloured tourist mythology.

For these reviewers, then, the oppositional values in LED are seen as crucial to the book's meaning.

Turning to MM, however, we find the oppositional view of colonial history more deeply buried in the text. The reviews of MM discussed in chapter 5 are on the whole too short to deal with much more than the contemporary problems of colonial society revealed in the novel. The socio-political context of Singh's story features prominently, especially in the longer reviews, and some reviewers go as far as referring to the "colonial agony"[58] and Singh's consciousness of "the violation of his birth-place by colonial pressures,"[59] but there is scarcely space, even in a generous 2,000 word review, to explore the roots of this condition. To demonstrate what can be uncovered, then, I shall give an example from a longer article by John Thieme: "A Hindu Castaway: Ralph Singh's Journey in The Mimic Men".[60] Thieme tracks Naipaul's allusions to an archetypal New World figure (Robinson Crusoe) and Hindu culture in order to explore more fully Singh's view of his own situation. In the process, Thieme displaces particular images, of houses and trees. Reading centripetally, he connects tree-images with Singh's own self-image and sense of shipwreck. At several points, says Thieme, "the tree image functions, in conjunction with the island setting, as a vivid symbol of Singh's sense of New World abandonment." He quotes three episodes in particular, two beach scenes featuring collapsed, washed-up trees (the "drownings" scene, and Singh's confrontation with Dalip), and the dynamiting of the gigantic tree-stump whilst Cripple-ville is being landscaped; in these scenes repeated allusions to a

pre-Columbian past contrast forcibly with the present sense of abandonment and violation. This is no mere nostalgia for Eden: Thieme comments, "Increasingly, as one reads The Mimic Men, Naipaul seems to be implying that the European 'discovery' of America has been analogous to the Fall for the continent."[61] Thieme's interpretation seems to me well-founded, but he is probably right to express it tentatively. The challenge to the conventional Western "discovery" view of history is far less obvious here than in LED, and easily obscured by other elements in this complex novel. In analysing critics' responses to MM, I think it has to be recognized that oppositional values may not be foregrounded, either because they take second place to other critical concerns, or else because the "negativity" singled out by some reviewers as a core element in the novel may apparently cancel out any suggestion of oppositional viewpoints.

This brief excursion has, I hope, demonstrated that Naipaul's engagement with the present reality of post-colonial society and its underlying myths can be seen, explicitly in LED and implicitly in MM, as challenging favourable Eurocentric views of the past. If Said is right in claiming that academic literary criticism encourages reverence for the dominant culture, we might expect to find critics playing down any such challenge. This expectation presumes a certain homogeneity of commitment amongst the critics under discussion; if they can be considered as members of a single interpretive community, it would have to be a large international community (Hamner's book was written in the U.S.A., Nightingale's in Australia, and although five of the seven studies were published in Britain, Thorpe was at the time of writing his pamphlet a Professor of English at Mount Allison University, Hughes is a Professor at the University of Zurich, and Theroux is, of course, an American). But the experience of reading the seven critical studies

suggests that despite having much in common, there are differences between critic and critic which amount to more than individual biases. In Fish's terms, these differences point to "ways of reading" as extensions of community perspectives, and I think these perspectives can be related to specific anchorage points in a context of culture.

I should make it clear that the distinctions I am trying to establish here are not the same as those used by Griswold in her analysis of the reception of Lamming's novels, which I referred to in chapter 5. She divided reviews according to the nationality of the publication in which they appeared, an approach which enabled her to distinguish between West Indian, British and American values in the production of literary interpretations. This kind of grouping would not be appropriate to my small sample of works spread across three continents (in terms of place of publication) and addressed to an international readership. Instead I have adopted a method of grouping based on the extent to which critics see Naipaul as a "Commonwealth" writer. The key factor, then, is not the critic's own nationality or background, but the choice of anchorage points from which Naipaul's writing is approached.

The "Commonwealth literature" perspective in critical studies on Naipaul can be identified sometimes by explicit labelling, sometimes by reference to the writers with whom Naipaul is compared. No-one writes about Naipaul without taking account of the complexities of his background, but we might expect critics who align Naipaul with other Commonwealth writers to place especial emphasis on his West Indian background. Anchorage points in this particular context of culture may help to define the parameters of centrifugal reading, and also, as I suggested in chapter 3, may enable critics to key easily into particular themes in Naipaul's work.

Sometimes the Commonwealth literature perspective can be very clearly identified. Hamner's book, for example, opens with a

discussion of the status of West Indian literature and lists the writers who, with Naipaul, have contributed to the growth of a West Indian tradition whose seeds "were sown at least as early as World War II."[62] In some cases, the absence of West Indian anchorage points is equally clear. Hughes, for example, makes no mention of other West Indian writers, but instead compares Naipaul to contemporaries such as Joan Didion and Hermann Broch, and gives him De Quincey, Lamb and Cobbett for literary ancestors. With several of the critics, however, the position is not so clear-cut, and I have had to take into account emphases as well as specific references.

According to these criteria, then, three of the seven critics can be considered as adopting a Commonwealth literature perspective. Hamner's position is quite explicit, but with Walsh and Thorpe this perspective is somewhat qualified. Walsh sees Naipaul not only in a context of West Indian society, but also compares him to R.K. Narayan[63] and (weakening the Commonwealth connection) Henry James.[64] Similarly, Thorpe begins by placing Naipaul in a list of post-war West Indian fiction-writers and ends by linking him with Conrad, Forster, Ford, Lawrence, Huxley, Woolf and T.S. Eliot.[65]

With the other group of four critics, though, anchorage points in West Indian society and culture are less prominent. Nightingale is, certainly, concerned with the "colonial dilemma" and the sense of dislocation "of which Naipaul and so many other West Indians write"[66] but she also stresses the wider, more general diagnoses of social malaise in his work; the connection between Naipaul and Conrad is commonly made, but establishing this link early, as Nightingale does, suggests an initial orientation which is not anchored in a West Indian context. White makes few explicit comparisons between Naipaul and other writers, but makes clear from the outset that Naipaul has, with good reason, rejected any idea of belonging to a West Indian school of

writers. White is well aware of the tensions and contradictions in Naipaul's position as a writer, but seems to approve of the way he has dissociated himself from other West Indian writers who, "by accepting and promoting the unimpressive race-and-colour values" of their group have aggravated the sickness of their society.[67] Nightingale and White, then, are both alert to the importance of Naipaul's background, but see his work as being broader in its scope than the Commonwealth literature perspective might allow. The last two critics, Theroux and Hughes, make even less use of West Indian anchorage points. I have already given some examples of the literary company Hughes chooses for Naipaul. Theroux refuses to put him in any other company at all: "he may be the only writer today in whom there are no echoes or influences" . . . "No country can claim him."[68]

I realize that there may be other significant influences in the approaches taken by various critics, but I hope the grouping I have made here on the basis of the strength or otherwise of a Commonwealth literature perspective is a fair one. The next step is to discover whether Naipaul's challenge to the European view of history is recognized by the two groups.

In the case of MM, none of the seven critics approaches the oppositional reading proposed by Thieme. Perhaps the closest we come to it is in White's comments on Singh's father, Gurudeva:

> It is this name that Browne persuades Kripalsingh to acknowledge as the opening shot of their campaign. To proclaim oneself Gurudeva's successor is to become the new champion of the poor. It is to rewrite the island's history, overthrowing Imperial ideas about backwardness and paternal care, and defining a new pattern of exploitation and heroic protest. 69

On a rather different point, Nightingale picks up the recurrent phrase, "The Niger is a tributary of that Seine", with its suggestion of the "mutual degeneration brought about by colonialism";[70] this "Heart of Darkness" theme certainly implies criticism of the representatives of

"civilization", but it is not quite as far-reaching in its implications as Thieme's point about "discovery". However, I do not think it is particularly significant that Thieme's kind of reading is not apparent in the critical studies. It was, as I suggested, a tentative reading, and MM offers other, more obvious criticisms of empire. However, it is noticeable that critics in the first group, who tend to adopt the Commonwealth literature perspective, use terms no stronger than "the decline of imperial power and confidence"[71] in accounting for the make-shift nature of Isabellan society and politics, whereas the examples I have given from the second group of critics emphasize "exploitation" and "mutual degeneration".

Turning to LED, in which oppositional values are more explicitly announced, we can see more marked differences between the two groups. In the first group of Hamner, Walsh and Thorpe, there is little if any comment on the falsity of the European view of history, except as regards the "insubstantial fantasy"[72] of the El Dorado myth itself. Walsh recognizes the "deeper colonial deprivation, the sense of the missing real world"[73] which afflicts Miranda, and then Trinidad, but makes no reference to other omissions and distortions in the historical record. Thorpe draws attention to "the innumerable atrocities against the weaker aboriginal or slave peoples . . . committed by those in petty authority" and characterizes Naipaul's attitude towards these atrocities as "a masterpiece of restrained indignation"[74] but again there is little suggestion that the conventional version of Trinidad's history might have been misleading. I have already said something about Hamner's close attention to the structure and patterning of LED [pp.138-40 above]; another important element in his critique of LED involves placing the events of Naipaul's narrative within a regional framework:

> So little information about the background of this area is readily available to the general public that Naipaul cannot rely upon a common store of knowledge. In order to re-create the life of the times, he must not only introduce new names but he must also show why and how they are vital to an understanding of the development of the region. 75

The Commonwealth literature perspective in this case seems to limit the extent of centrifugal reading; Hamner is no doubt right to suggest that LED contains "a critical look at the early, formative years of the emerging Third World",[76] but the implications of Naipaul's narrative as far as Europe is concerned remain out of reach.

The critics in the second group home in on aspects of the text which are not brought out by Hamner, Walsh and Thorpe. Nightingale, White and Theroux all quote the passage towards the end of LED in which Naipaul speaks of history as

> a fairytale about Columbus and a fairytale about the strange customs of the aboriginal Caribs and Arawaks . . . History was also a fairytale not so much about slavery as about its abolition, the good defeating the bad . . . 77

The fourth critic in this group, Hughes, quotes an alternative passage on "the New World as make-believe."[78] Hughes is particularly alert to the close interplay in Naipaul's work between fiction and history, and indeed Naipaul's doubts about the recovery of memory and the discovery of myth.[79] His version of LED emphasizes the point that Naipaul "translates the partial and mutilated records and stories of the West Indies into other languages; into the discourse of empire and utopia, the language of travel and discovery";[80] further, the slave society can sometimes only be glimpsed by the "calypso satire and costuming at Carnival [which] resonate out of that past silence."[81] White also draws attention to those absences in the conventional version of history which Naipaul's narrative foregrounds: "his sympathies are entirely with the Amerindians and the Negro slaves who, nameless, faceless, denied a voice in history, are present throughout the book as the oblique side

of every irony."[82] In Theroux's critique of LED quite a lot of space is devoted to the cruelties of Picton's new Negro code, as well as the effects of slavery on slave-owners; everyone who comes to Trinidad seems to become a victim of fantasy in some way, but the facts are very different: "the European vision and the colonial reality were never the same."[83] Similarly, Nightingale emphasizes the "conflict of ideal with reality"[84] in Naipaul's view of Trinidad, although she also sees a personal dimension in his de-mythologizing project:

> Naipaul seems to delight in putting in perspective the events that have been romanticized by history. Seeing himself, perhaps, as a victim of the criminal acts which deprived his people, the Africans and other minority groups in the Caribbean of their cultures, it is possible that his technique satisfies a personal need to take the romance out of the events that led to the "shipwreck" . . . [85]

In particular, Nightingale challenges Naipaul's presentation of Miranda, suggesting that in his concern to puncture the romantic myth, Naipaul slips into omissions himself. But, like the other critics in this second group, Nightingale certainly recognizes the oppositional viewpoint in Naipaul's version of history, even if she subjects it to further criticism.

So there do seem to be differences between the two groups of critics with regard to LED. Those who adopt the Commonwealth literature perspective tend not to follow through the implications of Naipaul's view of history as far as the traditional European account is concerned; on the other hand, Naipaul's challenge to the conventional version of history is more readily recognized by those critics who have not anchored their readings so firmly in a West Indian context of culture. This seems to support the idea that interpretive communities share ways of reading which permit certain meanings to emerge, but discourage other, less acceptable interpretations. But how do these findings relate to Said's claim that professional academic criticism

serves the dominant culture?

I am keenly aware that critical perspectives on Naipaul which approach him as a Commonwealth writer involve a certain paradox. On the one hand, when Western critics turn their attention to Commonwealth literature they are promoting the study of non-mainstream writing which, by its very nature, will raise questions about race, class and imperialism. On the other hand, it can be argued that by creating special categories for writers like Naipaul, Lamming, Achebe or Narayan, their work is further isolated from the mainstream of English language writing. The dilemma as far as Naipaul's work goes is revealed in the two reviews of MM from the Times Literary Supplement and the New York Review of Books discussed in chapter 5 [pp.112-15]: is Naipaul to be rescued from the Commonwealth literature ghetto, or is Commonwealth literature itself to be accorded a new respect? In fact, in Naipaul's case, the dilemma scarcely exists any more. Two simultaneous developments - increasing emphasis on "literatures in English" rather than "English literature", and the sheer scale of Naipaul's achievement - have lifted his writing out of this particular arena. But in general the Commonwealth literature perspective has not been completely worn away by new emphases on international literature, so there are other writers for whom the problem still matters. Indeed, the sub-division between "black" and "white" Commonwealth literature suggests that new hierarchies continue to be created. It seems that academic literary criticism, as an institution, generates structures within which particular ways of reading, community perspectives based on common anchorage points, have the power to shape and limit interpretation. The evidence from the first group of critics lends support to Said's theory of compliance. However, the readings of the second group of critics, who recognize the oppositional values in Naipaul's work,

suggest that the case is not hopeless; once Naipaul's writing is no longer marginalized, his challenge to the Eurocentric view is acknowledged and debated.

CHAPTER 7: THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL: A TEXT IN EQUILIBRIUM

Naipaul has published no further histories since The Loss of El Dorado, although history continues to be a central concern in his writing. In A Bend in the River (1979) one of the characters, Raymond, is a professional historian, who meditates on the difficulty of knowing the past. When another character remarks that "the truth is always there. It can be got at", Raymond replies:

> "Time, the discoverer of truth. I know. It's the classical idea, the religious idea. But there are times when you begin to wonder. Do we really know the history of the Roman Empire? Do we really know what went on during the conquest of Gaul? . . . Do you think we will ever get to know the truth about what has happened in Africa in the last hundred or even fifty years?" 1

Raymond is also aware of the difficulties of writing history. He excuses himself from the party where this discussion has taken place because he has just thought of a possible solution to a problem in what he has been writing, and needs to make a note of it before he forgets:

> "I find that the most difficult thing in prose narrative is linking one thing with the other. The link might just be a sentence, or even a word. It sums up what has gone before and prepares one for what is to come. . . . I don't think it is sufficiently understood how hard it is to write about what has never been written about before." 2

These are, one feels, difficulties that Naipaul is thoroughly aware of, but it is typical of the character he builds for this fictional historian that Raymond should create solemnity and tensions at his wife's party by his Casaubon-like deliberations. For Raymond is an inadequate historian, with little true knowledge of his subject, Africa, and he hides behind other people's scholarly papers; he is also in the pay of the Big Man. In the novel, the task of making truthful links between past and present falls to the narrator, Salim, who is not an historian, but uses his own observation and experience.

In his nonfictional writing since The Loss of El Dorado Naipaul has

chosen a role more like Salim's than Raymond's. He is an observer, caught up in "an intense experience".[3] When he travels to new places and listens to people's stories, his interest is aroused not only by what he finds around him in the present, but by the need to find roots for the contemporary condition in the past. In this process, the writer's urge to shape through fiction is supremely important. He writes in "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro":

> while, when I travel, I can move only according to what I find, I also live, as it were, in a novel of my own making, moving from not knowing to knowing, with person interweaving with person and incident opening out into incident. The intellectual adventure is also a human one: I can move only according to my sympathy. 4

The concept of the novel is here closely associated with the development of understanding, and the writer's function embraces the entire personality. It is not surprising, given this approach to the writer's responsibilities, that Naipaul returns repeatedly to his own history, and his need to understand it. In A House for Mr Biswas, The Mimic Men, "Prologue to an Autobiography" and The Enigma of Arrival aspects of Naipaul's personal and family history are worked and re-worked in ever-changing forms. In The Enigma of Arrival he brings personal history and the novel form into a new relationship, to produce a narrative which is finely balanced between contrary impulses. Like the two narratives that made up Finding the Centre, The Enigma of Arrival seeks "to admit the reader to . . . the process of writing"[5] and to discover truths, understanding, through a process of reading which mediates between these contrary impulses; thus the reader arrives at a fresh synthesis in which human experience and reflection are clarified and made new.

The Enigma of Arrival announces on its title-page that it is "a novel in five sections." Some reviewers questioned this description of genre, since the unnamed narrator's life and career follow Naipaul's own so

closely as to suggest autobiography.[6] We have already seen how, in The Mimic Men, Naipaul re-used elements of his own background and early experiences in creating his first-person narrator (to the initial confusion of some readers). In The Enigma of Arrival the correspondences are much closer: the narrator has not only continued to live the same kind of life as Naipaul himself since he came to England at the age of eighteen, but has written the same books (they are not named, but the references to, for example, In A Free State and The Loss of El Dorado are unmistakable[7]). There seems to be no separation between the narrator of The Enigma of Arrival and Naipaul, as far as the narrator's self-revelations go. However, there are limits to these self-revelations which are hardly compatible with autobiographical intentions. For example, the narrator of The Enigma of Arrival presents himself as a solitary man, whereas Naipaul has enjoyed a long and supportive marriage. This is an aspect of his life which Naipaul has chosen to keep private, and the reader who approaches The Enigma of Arrival as autobiography will soon run up against the separation between the public Naipaul (his books and his background are, so to speak, public property) and the man who carefully maintains his privacy. But the word "novel" on the title-page is a clear indication that any self-disclosure in The Enigma of Arrival is incidental or subsidiary to the narrative's chief project; just because the reader identifies some elements of the narrative as "true" in the autobiographical sense, it does not necessarily follow that all of it will be true in the same way. Jack, the Phillipses, Pitton, Bray, Les and Brenda, the narrator's landlord, and the other minor characters who flit in and out of the narrative may or may not have existed; the same holds for the narrator's cottage and its minutely described setting; Angela's letter and the landlord's poems may or may not be real documents. Naipaul's purpose in The Enigma of Arrival is not primarily to write about himself, nor, I think, is he indulging in metafictive

teasing. In an essay written shortly after finishing The Enigma of Arrival he quotes a passage from Proust's Against Sainte-Beuve which distinguishes between the "writing self" and the "social self":

> It is the secretion of one's innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone, that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life - in conversation, however refined it may be . . . - is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world. 8

What the writing self has secreted in this case is a meditation on particular themes - the past, continuity and change, wholeness - and the writing self as narrator speaks to the reader with the directness of an autobiographer.

So The Enigma of Arrival differs from autobiography in its primary intention. But it also differs from Naipaul's previous novels in its handling of fundamental elements such as plot and character. In his attempt to match literary form with experience, Naipaul draws on specific techniques associated with the novel, but often thwarts the reader's expectations and creates a new shape for the narrative, which the reader has to learn as s/he goes along. Whilst conventional critical approaches to the novel can go part of the way to accounting for the effects of The Enigma of Arrival, its innovatory form, its thwarting of the usual expectations, and its claims for the kind of evaluation more in keeping with nonfictional narratives mean that conventional criticism can produce only a partial account of the work. However, an approach which recognizes the pull of both centrifugal and centripetal impulses should allow a fuller, more productive reading - one that will do justice to the narrative's delicate balance between the form of the novel and the form of personal history, and between the different kinds of truth associated with these forms.

Both centrifugal and centripetal tendencies are in evidence in the book's prefatory matter. Titles of novels, usually evoking a particular theme, image or character, encourage a centripetal orientation, and in this case the reproduction on the book's dust-jacket of a detail from de Chirico's painting, The Enigma of Arrival, reinforces the centripetal tendency. "A novel in five sections" under the title perhaps carries a reminder of the nineteenth-century division of novels into volumes (usually three). But the dedication to V.S. Naipaul's younger brother, Shiva, with his dates of birth (in Port of Spain) and death (in London) exerts a centrifugal pull, because Shiva Naipaul, also a novelist, journalist and broadcaster, was a public figure whose sudden death in 1985 (whilst V.S. Naipaul was writing The Enigma of Arrival) was widely reported; the collocation of Indian name and Trinidadian and English place-names also reminds the reader of the complex cultural background shared by the Naipaul brothers.

The first section of the novel is called "Jack's Garden", setting up provisional expectations in the reader that a character called Jack will appear or be referred to. Jack does not appear immediately, but there are several passing references ("those two lanes met at Jack's cottage" [p.13], "the cottage-row in which Jack lived"[p.17]) during the first sub-section before we have a definite statement ("Jack lived among ruins, among superseded things" [p.19]) at the start of the second. The first sub-section has been about places rather than people, so by the end of it the reader is keen to meet a character other than the narrator - initial expectation thus being fuelled by delay. But we have to wait even longer for Jack to appear directly (p.30) so that we can begin to form some image of him, and it is with some relief that we read of contact being established between Jack and the narrator:

> But after some time, after many weeks, when he felt perhaps that the effort wouldn't be wasted, he adopted me. And from a great

> distance, as soon as he saw me, he would boom out a greeting, which came over less as defined words than as a deliberate making of noise in the silence. 9

Within a very few pages, however, Jack is dead (like most of the novel's events, this one happens "off-stage", only the absence of smoke from his cottage chimney signalling to the narrator that Jack's illness has run its course), so any hopes the reader had of Jack playing a part in a conventional plot are soon quenched. Jack does not simply disappear from the narrative, however; reflections on his way of life, inferences about his attitude to death, and thoughts about his garden as a symbol recur throughout the novel. But as far as possibilities for action, for plot-development are concerned, the reader soon realizes that, unless there are to be retrospective revelations about Jack's life (and there are none), this character will not be forwarding the "story" in any usual novelistic sense.

Much the same is true of the other characters the narrator finds around him during his "second life" in Wiltshire. They are often seen from a distance, their actions and relationships mysterious. Whereas a novelist usually brings to the reader's notice enough aspects of a fictional character's personality and background to make that character's behaviour comprehensible, in The Enigma of Arrival Naipaul leaves vast tracts of his characters' lives out of sight. The narrator looks for and sometimes finds explanations for other characters' behaviour, but these are usually localized insights; the whole person remains unknowable, and the fictional character retains his/her mystery and separateness. So to the limitations of a first-person narrative viewpoint, Naipaul as novelist adds further restrictions in what the narrator is permitted to observe or hear about. The result is a novel in which the concept of character is, as it were, split down the middle: on the one hand there are glimpses of people like Jack, Pitton, or the narrator's

landlord, whose individual mix of feeling and experience can only be guessed at; on the other hand, there is the narrator, Naipaul's "writing self", opening up to the reader his innermost life. Just as the character of Naipaul-the-narrator is not treated in the conventional manner of autobiography, so the presentation of other characters does not fit with the usual notion of fictional character. This is not simply a matter of how much the reader is directly told and how much left to infer; The Enigma of Arrival rather discourages the reader from thinking that characters could be more fully understood, even if more information were available. I think the reader is deflected away from such efforts because the novel also challenges conventional notions of plot, and plot and character are always intimately connected.

There are numerous possibilities for plots in The Enigma of Arrival. At one level, there is the story suggested by de Chirico's painting, the story that could have been The Enigma of Arrival, reduced to a paragraph (p.92) instead of a novel's length. There are also dramatic stories lurking below the surface of the lives the narrator sees glimpses of from his Wiltshire cottage. For example, the arrival of newcomers to the valley, the dairyman and his family (p.34), raises expectations of interaction. The narrator even uses the word "story" about them in recounting the local version of the newcomers' history, before he goes on to describe the dairyman, his wife and sons; the reader may well wonder whether the combination of background and physical description is offered as preparation for the unfolding of a plot. The descriptions themselves hint at potential drama, for the family physiognomy carries suggestions of mixed danger and suffering: the dairyman "had the face of a man who had endured abuse" (p.35); his elder son "had something of his father's abused, put-upon look; but there was about him an added touch of violence, of mischief, of

unconscious wickedness" (p.36). Violent events do indeed follow. One afternoon the dairyman and his son bring a pony to the paddock at the back of the narrator's cottage; there it is gelded and mutilated and led back, bleeding, past the cottage windows. This is, apparently, a fatal incident ("I never actually heard, but I believe the pony died" [p.38]), but at a causal level it is only obliquely connected with the quiet departure of the dairyman and his family from the valley, a few pages later. Interaction between the narrator and this set of characters is restricted to a one-word exchange with the eldest boy on the bus, and a brief visit by the dairyman to the narrator's cottage. Our expectations of plot are thwarted, and what claims our attention instead is the death of two horses (the second, a retired racehorse which comes to occupy the same paddock) within three pages. Already themes are assuming more prominence than either plot or character.

Another potential plot in the "Jack's Garden" section concerns Les and Brenda, a young couple who live in the valley. As friends of the manor's caretakers, Mr and Mrs Phillips, they begin to appear in the manor grounds near the narrator's cottage. The narrative circles round to these characters more slowly than to the dairyman, and their identities emerge only gradually. Again, the reader expects action to develop, for the narrator feels threatened by the couple's intrusion into the neutral territory he had been surrounded by, and he is particularly nervous of Brenda (p.63). As far as the narrator is concerned, though, only trivial events ensue - a garden sprinkler is turned on at the wrong time, some letters are not delivered. A far more dramatic story is to follow, reported by Mrs Phillips, but it is already distanced from the narrator, who has worked through his petty crises with Les and Brenda. So although he is surprised by Mrs Phillips' news that Brenda has "run off to Italy" with the local central heating

contractor, there is already a safe distance between the narrator and these characters' lives. Even the later news that Les has murdered his wife with a kitchen knife after her ignominious return prompts only detached reflection ("So hard to contemplate, the physical act, the setting, the finality, the body, just a few hundred yards away"[p.71]). The dramatic, almost clichéd story of adultery and murder is dealt with in the space of a few pages although, like the "classical" story inspired by de Chirico's painting, it could have occupied the whole length of a different sort of novel. In a similar vein, the story of Bray's "fancy-woman" in the fourth section, or Alan's suicide, or the history of the reclusive landlord could all be plot "material", but all are left in the background. In the second section, "The Journey", the narrator relates how, as a young writer, he looked self-consciously for "material"; this exposure of the narrator's naivety also reminds the reader, indirectly, that stories and characters are chosen, not given. The rejection of so many potential plot-lines from the Wiltshire sections of the novel cannot but strike one as a deliberate tactic, an effort to reach out to other possibilities in the novel. Anthony Burgess suggests that if The Enigma of Arrival is a novel, "it is one lacking in the trivial facetiousness and the fleshy sensationalism of the genre as we meet it these days."[10] Even more important is what this absence makes room for: the thematic structures and symbolic interpretations yielded by centripetal reading become proportionally more important as plot and character recede. So even on first reading, the reader must look to the thematic and symbolic coherence of the text for the kinds of satisfaction that would normally be given by the more accessible elements of plot and character.

At the same time as The Enigma of Arrival challenges fictional conventions with regard to plot and character, inviting the reader to

focus on the inner pattern thus revealed, it also exerts a continuous centrifugal pull. One important element here is, obviously, the autobiographical dimension I have already referred to. The narrator's frequent references to his own personal history do not necessarily presuppose existing knowledge in the reader, but they certainly invite one to check (for example, by reading the dust-jacket) how old Naipaul was when he came to England, where he went to university, what books he has written. In some places the novel relies heavily on intertextual references to Naipaul's other writings, and although these references yield thematic reflections (for example, about historical truth [pp.141-42]), at the same time they inform us about the evolution of Naipaul's "writing self".

Equally important, perhaps, as part of the centrifugal tension in the novel is the extraordinarily detailed representation of place. Even if the reader's own knowledge of Wiltshire goes no further than Salisbury and Stonehenge, the walker's eye-view of the landscape which emerges in the first, third and fourth sections enables one to make clear connections with a real place in real time. There are descriptions not only of an ancient droveway, the dry and flinty downs, and old barrows outlined against the sky, but of army firing ranges, discarded fertilizer sacks and a silage pit. Built into these careful and detailed descriptions are frequent reminders that perceptions often have to be revised. For example, the narrator initially assumes that the farm manager he sees on his walks is in fact the owner or lessee of the farm:

> ...I had accordingly given him a 'farmer's walk' when he got out of the Land-Rover at the barn and walked in to see how the grain was drying out or whatever it was he was going to check. I had endowed him with a special kind of authority, a special attitude to the land around us. But then I discovered, from the man himself, that he was not the landowner. And I had to revise my way of looking at him: he was only the farm manager, an employee. 11

This kind of mistake may be disconcerting, but it is easily corrected.

There are other errors of perception, though, for which counter-evidence emerges only slowly. After Jack's death, changes in the appearance of his garden force the narrator to revise his view of what is "natural":

> So much that had looked traditional, natural, emanations of the landscape, things that country people did - the planting out of annuals, the tending of the geese, the clipping of the hedge, the pruning of the fruit trees - now turned out not to have been traditional or instinctive after all, but to have been part of Jack's way. When he wasn't there to do these things, they weren't done; there was only a ruin. 12

Even trickier, perhaps, are the fantasies produced by the "literary eye". Jack is seen, several times, as being like a figure in a Book of Hours, celebrating the seasons, and his father-in-law seems "a figure of literature in that ancient landscape. He seemed a Wordsworthian figure: bent, exaggeratedly bent, going gravely about his peasant tasks, as if in an immense Lake District solitude" (p.20). There is beauty and comfort in such perceptions, but they may be illusions which run counter to historical reality: for example, in the component parts of Jack's garden the narrator sees a medieval village in miniature:

> it was this that suggested to me (falsely, as I got to know soon enough) the remnant of an old peasantry, surviving here like the butterflies among the explosions of Salisbury Plain, surviving somehow Industrial Revolution, deserted villages, railways, and the establishing of the great agricultural estates in the valley. 13

There are numerous examples in the "Jack's Garden" section of adjustments and revisions in the narrator's perceptions, but the most important change in his outlook concerns change itself:

> Here was an unchanging world - so it would have seemed to the stranger. So it seemed to me when I first became aware of it: the country life, the slow movement of time, the dead life, the private life, the life lived in houses closed one to the other.
>
> But that idea of an unchanging life was wrong. Change was constant. . . . 14

Thus the trickle of details about mistaken perceptions connects with a major theme of the novel - continuity and change. But whereas in a conventional novel the reader is usually left to infer themes, in <u>The Enigma of Arrival</u> the centrifugal tendency yields quite explicit

reflection.

Connected with the narrator's cautionary notes about initial impressions (and the mistaken judgements we sometimes arrive at)are occasional passages reminding us of the imprecision of memory. "In my first year, or the second" prefaces a couple of specific events (p.24, p.26) with a vagueness which undermines the usual authority of first-person narratives (especially fictional narratives) in such matters. In addition to having a fallible memory, we learn that the narrator is not always truthful:

> this feeling, of being private and unobserved,. . . made me, at the time of my own arrival, give false replies to questions from people I later knew to be farm workers or council workers. They had been friendly, interested; they wanted to know in which house I was staying. I lied; I made up a house. It didn't occur to me that they would know all the houses. 15

On a later occasion he has a different reason for avoiding the truth. Renovating a couple of old cottages for his new house, he realizes that he, in his turn, is altering the appearance of the land, "creating a potential ruin":

> after I had moved, when old people came to look at the cottages where they had lived or visited, I felt ashamed. And once - when a very old lady, not far from death, was brought by her grandson to look at the cottage where as a girl she had lived for a summer with her shepherd grandfather, and was so bewildered by the changed cottage she found that she thought she had come to the wrong place - once I pretended I didn't live there. 16

In a novel which is concerned with truth, and particularly with getting at truths about the past, these admissions of human error are a reminder, at a personal level, of obstacles in the way of truth. In his more impersonal historian's guise, Naipaul also reminds us that our knowledge of the past is often partial. Even a specific piece of evidence, a dated roadsign just outside Amesbury, can say as much about what is unknown as what is known:

> The historical feeling that had caused that sign to be put up had also brought about the restoration of the chapels and abbeys of Amesbury, as well as of the church that lay across the lawn from my own cottage: history, like religion, or like an extension of religion, as an idea of one's own redemption

and glory.

Yet there was an uncelebrated darkness before the foundation of that town of Amesbury in 979 A.D., as recorded by the sign. More than five hundred years before that, the Roman army had left Britain. And Stonehenge had been built and had fallen into ruin, and the vast burial ground had lost its sanctity, long before the Romans had come. So that history here, where there were so many ruins and restorations, seemed to be plateaux of light, with intervening troughs or disappearances into darkness. 17

Recorded history can be just as partial. In the second section of the novel Naipaul relates his search for sources for what is evidently The Loss of El Dorado:

> I thought of the project as a labour of a few months, journalism in hard covers. Then I discovered that the source books didn't really exist. The idea that historical truth is preserved somewhere in libraries, in semi-divine volumes, with semi-divine guardians, is something that many of us have, I suppose. But books are physical objects, created or manufactured to meet a demand; and there were no such semi-divine source volumes about Trinidad. 18

A more personal perspective on Trinidadian history appears in the final section, "The Ceremony of Farewell". After the funeral of Naipaul's younger sister, the rituals of a distant Hindu past are conducted in the rather incongruous new surroundings of suburban Trinidad. A distant relation begins to speak of the differences between the Indian immigrants who came to Trinidad after 1845, and those who he says came four or five hundred years ago. Naipaul as historian is well aware of the "mistakes" in this man's version of history, but at the same time acknowledges its value:

> History! He had run together the events of 1498, when Columbus had discovered the island for Queen Isabella on his third voyage; 1784, when the Spanish authorities, after three hundred years of neglect, and out of a wish to protect their empire, opened up the island to Catholic immigration, giving preference and free land to people who could bring in slaves; and 1845, when the British, ten years after slavery had been abolished in the British Empire, began to bring in Indians from India to work the land. He had created a composite history. But it was enough for him. Men need history; it helps them to have an idea of who they are. But history, like sanctity, can reside in the heart; it is enough that there is something there. 19

The centrifugal pull of the novel's insistent historical references is thus balanced against a view of history which elevates human need and sense of identity. The need is the narrator's, and other characters', as well as the distant relative's, and it relates to personal history as much as to the public version. In an earlier section, "Ivy", Bray begins to talk to the narrator about his boyhood memory of holiday service in the manor, where his father had been employed. For some reason, however, Bray stops his story. Without stepping outside the restricted narrative viewpoint he has imposed on himself, Naipaul is faced with a difficulty here in conveying what Bray is feeling, to explain why he has stopped his story. The narrator calls on imaginative sympathy to help him over this obstacle: "thinking back to my own past, my own childhood - the only way we have of understanding another man's condition is through ourselves, our experiences and emotions - " (p.220), he connects Bray's hesitancy with the abused condition of childhood. Here, I think, we can see the connection between Naipaul's view of the historian's role and the novelist's role. The search for objective truth is severely complicated by the elusive, partial and provisional nature of such truths; the making of fictions, setting plots in motion, is an artificial activity governed by artificial conventions; but the aim of both endeavours is understanding. By calling out in the reader the kinds of response appropriate to fictional narratives and those appropriate to nonfictional narratives, Naipaul makes us aware of this common aim, at the same time as showing us the pitfalls of the separate methods.

We have seen, so far, that The Enigma of Arrival invites but also challenges conventional novel-reading techniques, throwing an early emphasis on centripetal reading. At the same time it makes very deliberate use of anchorage points relating to Naipaul's life and works, and in its detailed evocation of specific places at specific

times, as well as its self-conscious reflections on history, the narrative also insists on centrifugal reading. It would be unlikely that these counter-impulses could be kept in balance throughout a book of this length without some adjustments to the conventional novel form, even if the rejection of "plot" did not in itself lead to re-shaping. There seem to be two main factors in the formal innovation Naipaul has wrought here. The first relates to small-scale movements of the narrative and can be clearly illustrated from the first two pages of the text. The opening sentences give us a sense of a new beginning and a state of ignorance: "For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was." From this base-line the narrator looks alternately outwards at his new surroundings, and backwards at his past. Thus the sight of the little river, the effects of snow on the lawn, the walk which leads to the stone circle of Stonehenge are interwoven with details such as "the tropical street where I grew up", "the many moves I had made in England", and thoughts of Salisbury, "the first English town I had got to know . . . from the reproduction of the Constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in my third-standard reader." This in-and-out movement of the narrative continues less conspicuously, and with variations in emphasis, throughout the book. Even the second section, "The Journey", which is substantially about Naipaul-the-narrator's first move from Trinidad to England, maintains the double perspective of the middle-aged narrator recounting adventures of his younger self. The second major factor in the re-shaping process is the extended use of repetition and return, so that cyclic patterns are created. This applies to the beginning and end of the book ("I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden" [p.318]), and to sections and sub-sections within it. For example, in "The Journey", Angela's letter at the end of the section recalls events

near the opening of the section. In the fourth section, "Rooks", which is about deaths and departures, the first sub-section opens: "Alan said, 'So Pitton left. Tremendous figure of my childhood.'" (p.259) The same kind of syntax is used for the opening of the second sub-section, about Alan's own death: "Mr Phillips's old father said to me, 'So your friend Alan died. Nice man. I hardly knew him. I saw him a few times. He was always very pleasant.'" (p.266) There are also links across sections: near the end of "The Journey" (pp.154-55) is a passage which takes us back to the first paragraph of the book and the four days of rain and mist. Sometimes self-conscious prolepsis is used to link section with section: in "Jack's Garden" we read, "Then (as the reader will learn about in more detail in a later place in this book) Pitton had to go." (p.60) Pitton's departure is described in the third section, "Ivy". The cumulative effect of such devices (and there are many more examples than I have given here) is to create a narrative structure which can only be described in a limited sense as being "linear"; it is, I think, more helpful to envisage the narrative as a series of overlapping cycles, some contained within others, with the whole complex structure in a state of dynamic tension produced by the opposing centripetal and centrifugal tendencies.

A narrative which circles in on itself as this one does also suggests a non-linear notion of time, and in this way the narrative structure reflects an important theme of the novel. The narrator's cottage is in the grounds of a manor house which in itself illustrates a cycle of history, from Edwardian confidence to late twentieth-century decay. This is symbolized in a circular object, a disc cut from the trunk of a cherry tree which has been smothered by ivy (pp.196-97) and whose rings show the change from healthy sap-wood to dark compression. The narrator also sees cycles in the lives of minor characters such as Jack's wife, who moves away from the valley after Jack's death:

> She saw her life as a small success story. Father a forester, a game-keeper of sorts; Jack the farm worker, the gardener; and now she half a townswoman.
>
> One cycle for me, in the cottage, in the grounds of the manor; another cycle on the farm, among the farm buildings; another cycle in the life of Jack's wife. 20

In a concept of history based on cycles, continuity and change belong together as part of the same process. Acceptance of this process can result in passivity, but it is also conducive to an appreciation of wholeness. The narrator of The Enigma of Arrival begins by seeing Jack and his garden as emblems of wholeness in a stable world, but comes to learn that in fact it is only Jack's tenuous and courageous hold on the land which creates this impression. The following passage expresses both the "innocent" and the "experienced" views of Jack:

> I saw his life as genuine, rooted, fitting: man fitting the landscape. I saw him as a remnant of the past (the undoing of which my own presence portended). It did not occur to me, when I first went walking and saw only the view, took what I saw as things of that walk, things that one might see in the country-side near Salisbury, immemorial, appropriate things, it did not occur to me that Jack was living in the middle of junk, among the ruins of nearly a century; that the past around his cottage might not have been his past; that he might at some stage have been a newcomer to the valley; that his style of life might have been a matter of choice, a conscious act; that out of the little piece of earth which had come to him with his farm-worker's cottage (one of a row of three) he had created a special land for himself, a garden where (though surrounded by ruins, reminders of vanished lives) he was more than content to live out his life and where, as in a version of a Book of Hours, he celebrated the seasons. 21

Near the end of this section, the narrator repeats his perception of Jack, but extends it, in order to work through to a deeper, more personal and also more universal level of meaning:

> Jack himself had disregarded the tenuousness of his hold on the land, just as, not seeing what others saw, he had created a garden on the edge of a swamp and a ruined farmyard: had responded to and found glory in the seasons. All around him was ruin; and all around, in a deeper way, was change, and a reminder of the brevity of the cycles of growth and creation. But he had sensed that life and man were the true mysteries; and he had asserted the primacy of these with something like religion. The bravest and most religious thing about his life was his way of dying: the way he had asserted, at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but life itself. 22

The final section of the novel, "The Ceremony of Farewell" (whose title is carefully balanced against "The Enigma of Arrival") returns to this motif: "Death and the way of handling it - that was the motif of the story of Jack" (p.309). The narrator's own melancholy and dreams of death are interrupted by news of real deaths, the public news of Mrs Gandhi's assassination in Delhi, and private news of the sudden death of his younger sister, Sati, in Trinidad. (Even at this most sensitive point in the novel, centrifugal and centripetal impulses are kept in balance.) The return to Trinidad involves, for the narrator, dealing with the puzzles and discontinuities of the Hindu rituals which the family still feel to be appropriate to a funeral, out of "a wish to give sanctity to the occasion, a wish for old rites, for things that were felt specifically to represent us and our past." (p.316) However, the narrator discovers that wholeness resides not in those ancient sanctities themselves, but in the making anew which is the only positive option left to the stranded voyager:

> Our sacred world had vanished. . . . Every generation now was to take us further away from those sanctities. But we remade the world for ourselves; every generation does that, as we found when we came together for the death of this sister and felt the need to honour and remember. It forced us to look on death. It forced me to face the death I had been contemplating at night, in my sleep; it fitted a real grief where melancholy had created a vacancy, as if to prepare me for the moment. It showed me life and man as the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory. And that was when, faced with a real death, and with this new wonder about men, I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden. 23

Making new, and awaking "the sense of true wonder",[24] describe, in Naipaul's vision, the true function of art.

The Enigma of Arrival repeats themes which are seen to be important throughout Naipaul's work and, as always, he is concerned with the difficulties of knowing and seeing aright. In this narrative he reaches out simultaneously to the "external truth" of personal history and observation of the real world, and to the "inner truth" of fiction,

in which character, events, theme and symbol form a coherent aesthetic unity. There are frequent references in The Enigma of Arrival to Constable, whose paintings combine detailed observation and understanding of landscape with an arrangement which is not always literally accurate. Like Constable, Naipaul seems to be aiming for a synthesis of different kinds of truth. This aim places considerable demands on the reader, who must keep a delicate balance between centrifugal and centripetal reading. If the effort succeeds, the text remains dynamic, but achieves a state of equilibrium.

CONCLUSION

I began by suggesting that Naipaul's work raises important questions about the nature of fiction. In a period of literary pluralism the close links between his fictional and nonfictional writings underline the importance of certain themes and at the same time oblige the reader to examine closely questions about truth. For example, how do we distinguish between history and myth, reality and fantasy? How do we arrive at an understanding of the past, and of our contemporary condition? How can that understanding be expressed through writing? The experimental form of some of his fiction, especially In a Free State and The Enigma of Arrival, suggests that although Naipaul has a continuing commitment to the novel, that commitment does not involve leaving the genre where he found it during the first phase of his writing career. In 1987 he wrote:

> Every serious writer has to be original; he cannot be content to do or to offer what has been done before. And every serious writer as a result becomes aware of this question of form; because he knows that however much he might have been educated and stimulated by the writers he has read or reads, the forms matched the experience of those writers, and do not strictly suit his own. 1

But he is aware, too, of the dangers of experimentation that is "not aimed at the real difficulties",[2] driving a wedge between writer and readers. His statements about the function of literature place a considerable weight of responsibility on the writer but, equally, he is alert to the reader's role as producer of meaning, sharer in the writing process.[3] This thesis has attempted to explore aspects of the writer-reader relationship, from the perspective of different kinds of readers, and with reference to different kinds of narratives. When I began this research, I imagined that 60,000 words would surely exhaust the topic, but as the thesis has progressed I have become increasingly aware of new avenues opening up, beyond the scope of the present work.

So in this final section I want to summarize the conclusions reached so far, especially with regard to my hypothesis of centrifugal and centripetal reading, and suggest some possibilities for further research along these lines.

Further investigations using narratives by Naipaul

The evidence relating to readings of The Mimic Men and The Loss of El Dorado in chapters 4-6 suggests that readers do process novels and historical narratives differently. These differences reflect learned and institutionalized conventions in reading, and a theory of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies provides a way of describing these differences whilst allowing for the fact that similar kinds of literary competence seem to be involved in both cases. However, historical narrative is just one of the forms of nonfiction which could be compared with fiction in this way. I suspect that expectations of other forms of nonfictional writing, for example, travel-writing or political journalism, may take shape more informally than expectations of an academically respectable genre such as historical writing. So it would be interesting to test the centrifugal/centripetal hypothesis using different kinds of nonfictional texts, and Naipaul's work provides several possible examples. As I suggested in my introductory chapter, Guerrillas can be read alongside "The Killings in Trinidad" and A Bend in the River alongside "A New King for the Congo", although in each case the narratives are of unequal length. Peter Hughes suggests other pairings: The Mimic Men can be linked with The Middle Passage and parts of In a Free State with An Area of Darkness.[4] My hypothesis of centrifugal and centripetal reading could, of course, be tested far more randomly than this, with novels and nonfictional texts unconnected with each other, but in the case of Naipaul's consciously linked narratives, one could attend to the way the intertextual relationship works, one narrative perhaps providing anchorage points for the

other. This is a possibility I did not fully explore whilst analysing the readings of The Mimic Men and The Loss of El Dorado, but since writing about The Enigma of Arrival I have become more aware of Naipaul's search for balance between different forms of narrative; it would, I think, be appropriate to ask how the reader perceives and responds to this factor.

The dynamics of reading

In chapter 4 we saw how individual readings of texts take shape, as the reader first searches for anchorage points, makes predictions, revises them, and seeks for connections between different components of the narrative. The problems inherent in analysing the responses of actual readers were offset, for me, by the often fascinating glimpses gained of the minutiae of reading processes. Nevertheless, the informant-based study reported in chapter 4 was limited in its scope, and constraints in the method used mean that its findings are perhaps best considered as indicators, pointers for further research. Chapter 4 could, then, be a pilot study for projects aimed at discovering more about the way non-professional readers read book-length prose narratives. Among the specific questions which might be addressed are some relating to initial orientation. What kind of anchorage points do readers select, and how do these affect reading? Do assumptions about genre figure in the initial choice of anchorage points, and how are unhelpful assumptions modified? With reference to nonfictional narratives, it would certainly be relevant to ask how far centripetal reading depends on adequate centrifugal connections being made.

In chapter 3 I discussed the importance of re-reading, and suggested that this element in the reading process is often under-estimated. Informant-based research into this area would, I am sure, be useful to teachers of literature, especially with regard to novel reading.

However, whilst readers often make a conscious decision to "read a novel again", much re-reading activity (back-tracking, reviewing, finding one's place again after a pause) is embarked on almost unconsciously, and research methods directed at finding out when and why this takes place would need to be a good deal sharper than the informal methods I used in my study. But further research into re-reading would perhaps illuminate the processes by which textual details are displaced, either centrifugally or centripetally, and how interpretations are reached.

It may be, of course, that the simple centrifugal/centripetal hypothesis needs to be refined. Without wanting to replicate the complexity of Kintgen's "elementary operations"[5] I can see that it may be desirable to break down centrifugal impulses into those which help the reader to make sense of, or understand more about, the "real" world, and those which bring information <u>from</u> the real world to help the reader make sense of what s/he is reading (the latter would correspond to Rodway's "metacriticism"[6]). Such a distinction would probably suggest that the interplay between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies is, at specific points in the reading process, very subtle, but the overall balance between the two should still be helpful in distinguishing between the reading of fiction and nonfiction.

<u>Interpretive communities and literary criticism as an institution</u>

Different kinds of possibilities arise from the material in chapters 5 and 6. The published readings of <u>The Mimic Men</u> and <u>The Loss of El Dorado</u> discussed there raised questions about the way interpretive communities' communal perspectives are formed. These questions could be considered further, not necessarily using the hypothesis of reading I advance here (although the concept of anchorage points may still be useful). My analysis of the "Commonwealth literature" perspective on Naipaul may provide pointers for further research into the mechanisms

by which particular (maybe partial) readings of texts are permitted and become institutionalized, whilst other readings are discouraged. This kind of research would link with work being done by sociologists of culture. Griswold's study of the reception of Lamming's work, which I referred to in chapter 5, used the idea of interpretive communities based on nationality, but this is just one among many possible approaches. In a recent essay called "Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation"[7] Marjorie De Vault uses other dimensions of difference in accounting for variant readings of Nadime Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World: these include readers' genders, historical contexts, and purposes for reading. But she insists that varying interpretations do not depend simply on individual insights; all interpretation is a collective activity and even "reading as an outsider . . . is learned from a community."[8] De Vault suggests that there is at present

> a new diversity within cultural elites, the result of groups traditionally outside the dominant culture - women, racial minorities, and those on the geographical margins - becoming more active and visible in the production of cultural works, in audiences, and in scholarship about literature and art. 9

In this new climate, new theoretical frameworks are needed - frameworks that will allow both conventional and divergent interpretations to be tested. The work of Stanley Fish already provides a bridge between literary theory and sociology of culture, and this seems to me to be an area where there is increasing scope for a fruitful sharing of insights.

Further analysis of texts "between the genres"

I noted in chapter 3 [p.65] that theories of prose narrative often have difficulty accommodating texts such as "nonfiction novels" which are neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional. The reading of The Enigma of Arrival in chapter 7 based on centrifugal and centripetal tendencies suggests that my hypothesis could be very useful in the analysis of "borderline" texts, since its workings do not depend on concepts of

epistemological authority. The hypothesis could be tested on other generically problematic texts, such as Defoe's Journal of the Plaque Year and more recent "experimental" novels (Julian Barnes' Flaubert's Parrot [1984] is an interesting possibility) as well as on the non-fiction novels of the 1960s mentioned earlier. If, like Naipaul, writers of other "borderline" texts are aiming at a synthesis of different kinds of truth, the centrifugal/centripetal hypothesis should permit a more positive reading than is possible using theoretical approaches which must, in order to work, ignore or negate aspects of the texts.

I have tried, in this thesis, to approach Naipaul's work principally from the reader's angle, and I hope that the theory of centrifugal and centripetal reading has been shown to be useful in distinguishing between the ways we, as readers, approach fictional and nonfictional narratives. But I hope that the thesis has also conveyed, by implication, my sense that Naipaul's work occupies a very important place in contemporary literature. Some of his books make uncomfortable reading, and he may sometimes express views with which one wants to argue, but the recurring themes of his work - race, dispossession and dislocation, the individual's lonely search for meaning in a chaotic world - are extremely relevant to late twentieth-century societies. Another kind of relevance derives from the positive side of his vision, a belief in the shaping power of art, and the challenging of traditional forms which this entails. The integrity of his vision is conveyed through a prose style of luminous clarity, and perhaps it is this quality, above all others, which makes reading V.S. Naipaul truly worthwhile.

NOTES

Preface

Most of the works referred to in these notes also appear in the Bibliography, where full publishing details are given. For works not cited in the Bibliography, footnote references have been expanded.

Page references to Naipaul's works relate to the paperback editions listed in the Bibliography, except in the case of The Enigma of Arrival.

INTRODUCTION (pp 1-11)

1. Quoted in Paul Theroux, "V.S. Naipaul", Modern Fiction Studies, vol.30, no.3, p.454.

2. Finding the Centre, pp.25-26.

3. Edward Said, "Expectations of Inferiority", New Statesman, 16 October 1981, p.21.

4. Miguel Street, p.167.

5. V.S. Naipaul, "Speaking of Writing", The Times, 2 January 1964, p.11.

6. A number of the short stories later collected in A Flag on the Island date from the period 1950-60.

7. An Area of Darkness, p.27 and p.263.

8. Ibid., p.265.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 Extracts from transcripts of interviews with informant T

1. (Initial meeting)

T: [Looking at back cover of MM] Well, this one sounds as though it's got quite a lot of action, doesn't it?..And presumably quite a lot of retrospective comments about how he came to be disgraced...and some sort of social comment about run-down gentility...Does it say when it's set? [Looking at opening] Ah, "Shortly after the end of the war" - it doesn't tell you which war. Presumably the person involved is sort of Indian, with a name like Singh, but this all took place in London, so presumably he comes from an Anglo-Indian...[reading back cover] "finds himself caught in the upheaval of empire". [Reading back cover of LED] I love the way he describes it - this is presumably his description of Trinidad - "the fag end of the world" - or is that a description of one of the characters in the book? I've never been there, but I trained with a girl from Trinidad, and her descriptions of it . . . Well this is much more historical. It doesn't tell you how long a time-span it deals with - yes, this almost sounds as though it could be - mind you, I don't imagine for one moment it is - but it almost sounds as if it could be a sort of larger than life, rather lurid story of dreadful goings-on in the sugar plantations - I don't imagine it is, but itsays, you know, "this terrible cruelty" - you could imagine . . . in the hands of someone like Harold Robbins it could turn out to be rather different . . . [Turning to title-page] Yes, he calls it "A History" which presumably means that it's . . . more than a novel . . . it's a much more factual account . . . Yes, presumably there's a tremendous amount of research gone into this. [Turning to back cover again] Is it actually factual? It's difficult to tell . . . a sort of history - "by a novelist - as remote from professional history as one can imagine" - then he describes it as "what a story". Perhaps not so much an actual history as faction.

2. (After reading about 150 pages of MM)

T: I liked very much, although it sounds extremely perverse, I liked very much the description of the drowning - I know that sounds a terrible thing to say, but the way that was described . . . I thought was beautifully done . . . It struck me very much that I liked the way it was written, I found it beautifully described . . . I didn't know why it was significant that these people had drowned . . . it's something you would remember, obviously, if you'd seen it you'd never forget, but I didn't know why . . . I'm ever hopeful that at the end of the book I may be able to resolve for myself why it is significant, but I'm not totally convinced that I will be able to . . .

LP: When you say, looking for the significance of the drowning episode, do you mean significance to Ralph Singh and why he's chosen to record it -

T: Yes, I think so. I certainly got the impression from the way he wrote about it that he thought it would be significant in the way that . . . his father behaved occasionally, smashing all the coca-cola bottles and then going off on this strange pilgrimage . . . I thought the drownings were as well, but I haven't quite worked out why yet . . . but as I say, I did feel

Appendix 1 (continued)

it was essential to be able to see it all as a whole and then I might be able to sort out more what I think about various things.

3. (After finishing MM)

T: I think by the end I'd got more to grips with him and women, which I found difficult at first - I didn't quite understand what he was at, really, but I think by the end I'd realized that basically he didn't get on terribly well with women . . . somehow or other he didn't fulfil their expectations and that they didn't fulfil his either, and in spite of his, what's it called, his randy student phase, in fact . . . he was quite undersexed in lots of ways, I thought.

LP: Were there any other aspects of the book you found you'd worked out better by the end?

T: I don't know whether I worked them out or whether he told me. I think it was page 243, it says something about he didn't understand the formlessness of his life . . . and he says something in another place as well, I noticed, that he regards his life as . . . a series of incidents, but he's not quite sure how they're connected together, and . . . although he's written them all down, I'm not sure in the end that he's any idea of the relevance of anything really, and that he's just recorded them, but isn't sure what he was doing a lot of the time . . . Once or twice he makes remarks about him being a prisoner - when he becomes a government minister he says, I was a prisoner, and somewhere else, about his early life as well . . . and I think he feels - he hasn't been a man of destiny, he's been more a creature of circumstance.

4. (After reading about 130 pages of LED)

T: I found the Prologue quite confusing, really, in fact I read it more than once because I got to the end of it and I thought, what? So I had to go back and - mind you, I must confess I know absolutely nothing about the history of Trinidad, or Venezuela - or anywhere, basically - I know English history and that's about it.

LP: So this was new material?

T: I did know about Sir Walter Ralegh going there, I suppose . . . but I can't say I know much else about what was going on there.

. . .

I think I've been struck by how utterly gruesome it all sounds, constant massacres and the Caribs who go around eating people and just generally the beastliness of it all, but I suppose that at the time this is set it's probably what you would expect, that life was still nasty, brutish and short - it seems to have been extremely short for a lot of people who had the misfortune to be in the West Indies at the time. It also seems to have been, well, I suppose things haven't changed really, but there were lots of people going around whose ambition in life was absolutely nothing to do with setting up any sort of empire - even if that were considered a vaguely honourable thing to do - but just generally to get their hands on as much booty as possible and it didn't matter who got in their way . . .

. . .

LP: Have you any idea in your mind about how the narrative will develop?

T: No. No. It could carry on being just a history, or it may go off and be something else entirely. A lot of the book seems to be devoted to the torture of Luisa Calderon - that can't be just a straightforward history . . .I'm not sure what's going to happen.

APPENDIX 2 Extracts from transcripts of interviews with informant N

1. (Initial meeting)

N: [Looking at opening pages of LED] Oh, there's some autobiographical detail in this one, I don't know whether there is in the other . . . I did find out something about the man, he's a West Indian, he's from Trinidad, I think, isn't he? . . . [Looking through LED] It seems to be about Trinidad, oh, it's in the revolutionary period, 1797 [looking at maps] . . . My period, strictly speaking, is the sixteenth century, but I know a fair amount about the eighteenth century . . . [looking at first section of LED] Oh, he goes to the sixteenth century to begin with . . . This is two stories, then, it's not a novel. Is it two short stories or is it a novel?

LP: When you say it's not a novel, that's the alternative you think think of, short stories?

N: Well, I was just thinking, he says, "This is made up of two forgotten stories" . . . yes, I did think it might be two short stories, but there must be some link, possibly there is some link. . . . The historical side obviously attracts me . . . [looking at contents page] three parts . . . [looking at back cover] Yes, this will be interesting to me because the blurb says it's "history by a sensitive and highly intelligent novelist as remote from professional history . . ." I mean, what I shall be looking at, I think, is . . . first of all, how far is it history, you know, I mean, is it sound history.

2. (After reading MM)

N: It starts in 1946 and it doesn't mention Sandra until about half way through that first section and even in the first part there are flashes back from 1964 right at the end . . . it doesn't seem to be . . . I found particularly obscure - I had to read it about four times - page 7, the last sentence of the last complete paragraph.

LP: The shipwreck?

N: Yes, now, you see, I wasn't quite sure in what time sequence he was . . . There are several time sequences there - the beginning of the paragraph is in 1946, just after Shylock has died, yet towards the end it seems to be in a much later context . . . It wasn't until I read that paragraph very carefully that I saw that he had actually moved in that paragraph from 1946 to 1964. In fact, there was one pluperfect tense that I attributed to his musings for 1946, but they're really in 1964, aren't they? That's the sort of ambiguity I found. Then he goes on to tell the story of his marriage, return to Isabella, his fortune he made and then the collapse of his marriage . . . so that he's got a reversal of sequence as well as dotting about in the actual writing in that first section. Then section two is childhood - that's fairly straightforward, there's no problem there. And there's no problem in three. In other words, what should have been, from my point of view, childhood, student days, marriage - it should be A/B/C but it becomes B/A/C and I can't really see any reason why that should be so. . . . I mean, a historian doesn't work like that, it's a different way of - he must have had some, presumably, he must have had some idea that this - he likes to mystify, doesn't he?

LP: What effect does starting where he does have on your reading?
N: I found it a bit irritating, to have to keep dodging about . . . and puzzling.
LP: What sort of impression of Ralph Singh do you form - at the outset?
N: Well, West Indian, he was a most strange, exotic . . . quite unlike anything - out of my - I must have led a very sheltered life! Yes, I suppose I think I can see what he's getting at. If you want to create a first impression . . . a historian would do it differently, by creating the background and building up as he went along. What puzzles me is why he didn't mention Sandra in this earlier part. I felt that - I don't know if this is right - I didn't feel that . . . he's very much a masculine writer - I don't feel that his pictures of women are . . . he has a tendency to caricature, to heighten extremes. I've never met any women such as he describes here. Though of course, I'm not familiar with this particular background . . .
LP: So you felt that the characterization of the women was -
N: Inadequate, I thought. That was my feeling, yes. I've put here [referring to notebook] "Inadequacies: feminine characters, and a tendency to caricature". I didn't find that he had any real explanation of the breakdown of the marriage - not really deep down. There was no attempt to look at it from Sandra's point of view, as far as I could tell. I can't imagine that Naipaul himself is like this, of course, it's the way he's portraying Ralph Singh.

3. (After reading LED)

N: It makes you want to read some of the things that he's read himself, which I think is the sign of a good historian. . . Difficult exactly to characterize this - it's certainly not orthodox history and yet he's obviously familiar with a good deal of the orthodox history - makes some very pertinent comments. I think he's got some powerful insights and it's an ingenious - it's an idiosyncratic history, isn't it, personal - I think Trinidad is the hero of this story, in a way, rather than any of the individuals. It's a quintessence, really - he's trying to distil the essence of the history of Trinidad.
. . .
LP: Was there any difference in the kind of questions you were left with at the end of MM and LED?
N: There's a similarity in that both are about colonial history and both show a sharp awareness of politics and social life in a colony, though LED being historical and covering so much wider ground . . . MM raised in me questions of how a novelist conceives his theme and how he plans, I didn't really - I was interested in the techniques and aims of Naipaul, whereas in LED the final impression was that I would like to find out more about Trinidad and how far his analysis would hold water. Though I believe the only thing a historian can do is impose a pattern - there's no absolute truth. I think LED is unique, and I think Naipaul is a historian manqué. I don't think he would ever have buckled down - I'm not saying he hasn't done the research - but a historian wouldn't have tackled such a big subject on the reading that he's done. I think he has many of the qualities of a first-rate historian. But there's a novelist who keeps popping up.

APPENDIX 3 Ronald Bryden's review of The Loss of El Dorado, New Statesman, 7 November, 1969.

Between the Epics

RONALD BRYDEN

Within a century of Columbus's landfall, the New World was gutted. Its two great civilisations had been destroyed. The gold of the Aztecs, lost in Cortes' retreat from Tenochtitlan, lay scattered on the bed of Lake Texcoco. That of the Incas, stripped from palace and temple to ransom Atahualpa, had been melted down among Pizarro's 165 men. But no one could believe that was the end. Legends persisted of another hidden empire, another secret hoard in the Americas. Adventurers continued to struggle up muddy rivers, through trackless vacancies of desert and rain forest, like flies over a continent of flypaper. In the north, they followed the mirage of Cibola's golden cities. In Colombia and Venezuela, they pursued a folk-memory of pre-Columbian glory: a tale of a king who yearly painted his body with gold-dust and dived into a lake – the gilded man, *el dorado*. He became a dream of a city, a lost realm of gold: of a third marquisate of New Spain to rival Mexico and Peru. Quesada, the conquistador of Colombia, exacted a title to it from Philip II and, dying of leprosy, bequeathed it to a niece whose husband, a 60-year-old soldier named Antonio de Berrio, sailed in search of his inheritance in 1580. He set up his base camp on a swampy, mountainous island off the mouth of the Orinoco. Columbus, sighting three of its peaks on his third voyage, had named it Trinidad.

V. S. Naipaul, whose pen is arguably the only authentically golden article Trinidad ever shipped to Europe, has written a history of the island where we both were born.* Coming after *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*, it began, I suspect, as yet another quest for a personal past, a root in the world to save him from the hollow sense of dispossession and exile he diagnosed as the colonial sickness in *The Mimic Men*. But because, as he shows, the whole history of Trinidad was to be regarded never as a place in itself, always as part of some grand, ulterior European fantasy, and because he is far more than a local historian, he has ended by writing much more than that. His book is a study, the most brilliant I've yet read, of the grassroots of imperialism: of what life was like in those colossal, neglected tracts of colonial tissue between imperialism's epics, the El Dorados which paid off. In a shabby corner of the ghost province which failed to become Spain's third marquisate, he traces the origins of the Third World.

Antonio de Berrio made three journeys up the Orinoco, but the nearest he came to a city of gold was the village he founded himself, a few dozen mud and palm-thatched houses around a church, in the foothills behind Trinidad's swampy north-western coastline. His claim to El Dorado was swallowed up in the greater fame of Raleigh's quest, the dream of the 'Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana' whose Indian women would become, with the help of Devon sailors, the mothers of a new, Arcadian race. In 1595 Raleigh sailed into the muddy gulf between Trinidad and Venezuela, burned Berrio's town and took the old Spaniard prisoner. Berrio told him all he knew of El Dorado, which was tales the Orinoco Indians had told him, and for his pains was marooned on the Venezuelan coast with a handful of followers, to die more or less lunatic on an island in the huge river which led nowhere.

Raleigh spent six days probing the watery labyrinth of its mouths, turned back depressed in a tropical downpour, lost 40 men in a raid on a Spanish coastal settlement and 27 more poisoned hideously by Indian arrows. That was the extent of the adventure on which he based his scheme for the empire of Guiana when he regained London. Ironically, it was his true stories which were doubted: the oysters which 'grew on trees' in Trinidad's tidal mangroves, the lakes of pitch from which he caulked his ships, his descriptions of flying fish and the birds of the Venezuelan forest, 'singing on every tree with a thousand severall tunes, cranes and herons of white, crimson and carnation pearching in the rivers side'. His inventions were believed because people wanted to believe them: the 'mountaine of christall like a white church-tower of an exceeding height' over which a mighty river poured without touching it; the mine not seen but vouched for by the Indians; the tribe whose heads 'appeare not above their shoulders'. All he brought back was one line for *Othello*. But the dream of El Dorado was strong enough for James I to parole him from the Tower 22 years later, on a second, disastrous attempt to make his lies true. His son Wat was killed storming a Spanish settlement. His friend Keymis, who had vouched for the mine, committed suicide. On his return to London in 1618, he was executed.

After Raleigh's failure, the dream waned for 200 years. The Spanish trader who had told him of Indians with heads beneath their shoulders admitted to later travellers that perhaps they just had short necks. Then the dream came to life again in another form. If Trinidad were not the base for El Dorado, it might be the pivot for overthrowing Spain's tottering power in the New World: an offshore outpost from which to launch a Latin American revolution and, after it, to become the British Panama through which the trade of the continent would be channelled to London, Bristol and Liverpool. In 1797, taking advantage of Spain's alliance with Napoleon, a British force under Admiral Harvey and General Abercrombie descended

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on the island and took it without a struggle. Abercrombie's aide-de-camp, Colonel Thomas Picton, was appointed governor, with instructions to give shelter to Latin American revolutionaries plotting the liberation of the Spanish mainland.

The Berrio of Naipaul's second story, the only other occasion when Trinidad's history almost impinged upon that of the world, is Francisco Miranda, the Venezuelan radical who played the part of a kind of ineffectual John the Baptist to Simon Bolivar. Noble, impractical, fatalistic, he had canvassed the titans of the 18th-century stage – Washington, Catherine the Great, the younger Pitt – with a scheme for an independent empire from the Mississippi to Cape Horn, to be ruled by an hereditary emperor or Inca, advised by two legislative chambers. It was his misfortune that the only support he found for his dream should be that of a man even more sinisterly flawed than Raleigh by ambition and bad faith; the only soil from which to launch it an island too provincial and impoverished, physically and spiritually, to nourish the grander altruisms.

In the two centuries since Raleigh's last voyage, Trinidad had become a backwater of empire, a jungly slum whose tiny scandals and concerns – an Indian rising, an unthatched church, a smallpox epidemic – took anything up to six years to reach the attention of Spain's over-burdened bureaucracy. In an attempt to strengthen it against Britain's growing power in the Indies, the last Spanish governor, Chacon, had invited settlement by French planters. When the French Revolution lit flames of revolt in Martinique and San Domingo, hundreds fled there with their slaves. The island over which Thomas Picton was appointed governor was a mixed slave-colony, with a tiny population of French and Spanish planters, a few English slave-traders, keeping down several thousand Negroes.

Picton, a professional soldier who had grown quick-tempered in a career without battles or preferment, dreamed of fame as the instrument of Spanish-American liberty. But meanwhile he was supporting a coloured mistress on a governor's salary of 30s a day. He bought some land and Negroes; it was said that he also hunted down and sold slaves who had escaped in Spanish times. He became part of Trinidad's slave-holding establishment, fearful of republican ideas spreading among the island's free mulattos as they had in San Domingo, committed to the use of Port of Spain gaol as a centre of discipline and torture for fractious blacks.

He encouraged Miranda and his agents in Trinidad on paper. In practice, he temporised, leaving letters from London about aiding an invasion of Venezuela unanswered for months and busying his garrison building forts on the hills around Port of Spain against the possible Venezuelan invasion of Trinidad which loomed larger in his mind. He shipped one of Miranda's agents off the island, and was suspected of some responsibility for the poisoning of another. Their wild talk of freedom was too dangerous in a community like Trinidad's.

And then he went too far. He ordered the torture of a mulatto girl Luisa Calderón, whose jealous protector accused her of helping another man to rob him. She was handed over to the keeper of the Port of Spain gaol, who did to her as he had often done to recalcitrant slaves to gain confessions of poisoning or obeah: hung her by one wrist, with her toe resting on a sharpened stake. There was an outcry by radicals among the English traders, a commission of investigation sent out from London, a famous trial in London in 1806. Conditions in the Port of Spain gaol were exposed, the gaoler was disgraced, the gaol eventually pulled down. But encouragement of the mulatto community against the whites was too risky, after the San Domingo revolution; the commissioners denounced the torture of slaves, but had no brief to denounce slavery. In the end, everything was smoothed over. The gaol was rebuilt, the English radicals deported and Picton went on to become a hero of the Peninsular Wars. The chance of Trinidad becoming the base for Latin American liberation, the British Panama, was lost for good. Six years later, much too old for adventure, Miranda was used by Bolivar as a figurehead in his first, abortive Venezuelan revolution, installed briefly as a dictator, then betrayed and exiled, as Bolivar in turn was to be betrayed.

Naipaul leaves the reader to see the pattern repeating itself in the history of British colonialism: the too-large idealism foundering in the realities of distance, poverty, human greed and pettiness. The dreams of El Dorado and Miranda's empire yield to the larger, world-wide mirage of *Civis Britannicus sum*, but whatever European fantasy Trinidad became part of, it remained small, muddy, isolated, a community of wooden shacks and tin roofs where stray dogs barked at night, officials helped themselves to public funds and white people employed coloured people to keep down black people. Its values, its official culture, were always imported from elsewhere: expensive metropolitan suitings too alien to the climate and pocket of the place to be worn on days other than Sundays, discrediting the possibility of any altruism, among a population taught cynicism by masters.

To a Trinidadian, even one who thought he had faced the worst about his homeland, this book is depressing reading. The tropical suburban streets of my childhood named for Picton, Abercrombie, Chacon, take on a sinister new meaning, like the names of those German villages where the concentration camps were discovered. The sleazily romantic old Hotel Miranda, a leading Port of Spain *maison de convenance* of my youth, becomes a symbol of a more cerebral prostitution. The clincher to Naipaul's argument about what went wrong with the island where we grew up is that most of his book will be new and startling to Trinidadians.

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The island history of cruelty, degradation and hypocrisy has been raked over, buried in the British Museum archives where he found it, replaced with a poster-coloured tourist mythology.

It may take time for the importance of what he has written to disentangle itself from the actual writing. Obviously he has found his book as depressing to write as I found it to read. At times the style reminds me of the later volumes of Carlyle's life of Frederick the Great, the book in which he set out in search of a hero and found only dusty volumes of pettifogging Machiavellianism. The short, disgusted sentences chase after each other with a kind of seething impatience; the minor characters, each more venal than the one before, are yanked on and off the stage with scarcely the courtesy of an introduction.

Also, he has assumed in his reader a knowledge of other colonial histories which most western universities are only beginning to wonder whether to prescribe in their syllabuses. To savour the full irony of Miranda's frustrations in Trinidad, it's necessary to know at least in outline the course of Bolivar's career. To understand the frenzy and hypocrisy of British officialdom, both in London and Port of Spain, at the turn of the 19th century, you need to have read C. L. R. James's classic history of the San Domingo revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, which is out of print in this country. But when the shelf of the histories of the Third World's origins has come into existence, *The Loss of El Dorado* will stand there beside it.

For those who prefer the old, simple epic version of American conquest, Hammond Innes's *The Conquistadors* retells the stories of Cortes and Pizarro in a business-like style, decked out wih lavish illustrations of Mexican and Peruvian landscapes, antiquities and paintings.† The main gain over Prescott is that he has studied the archaeology of Incas and Aztecs before the conquest, and travelled the routes of the conquistadors, by road and sail. If you can put up with occasional pages on which he sounds as if he were plotting you an AA route over the Andes, he'll give you a feeling of the terrain which Prescott never saw, and the pictures are superb. But of irony, complexity, the sense of waste and futility between the epic lines which Naipaul sheds by implication over the whole New World, there's not a thought.

APPENDIX 4 Karl Miller's review of The Loss of El Dorado, Listener, 13 November, 1969.

Power, Glory and Imposture

The Loss of El Dorado. By V. S. Naipaul. Deutsch 35s.

All stories are sad stories—if you tell them that way. V. S. Naipaul sees the story of the West Indies, of the old Spanish Main, as one characterised by absurdity and futility; starting as a humble, fearful settlement which was also the stage for romantic dramas of misconceived adventure and muddling greed, Trinidad entered modern times, essentially diminished, as a 'remote municipality' bypassed by the chief shipping routes. He is entitled to feel this way about his subject-matter; he can't exactly be disproved. But there are other ways to feel about it too. It is possible to think that the society he is describing—with its race relations and slavery and wildcat commerce—has decisively influenced our own, that this remote municipality is a place of enduring consequence, that it has, in a sense, conquered the world. In Naipaul himself, it has given Britain the best of its younger writers. It is also possible to object to the presence, among the ineffectual and cowardly persons who are gathered into the book, of a very interesting man who wrote some of the best poems in the English language, Sir Walter Ralegh. One way or another, it is possible to argue against several of the interpretations in this book. But it is hard to deny the strength and authenticity of the vision it contains.

Slavery is without annals, without individuals. Naipaul has chosen to recount a small number of episodes, so that the Caribbean darkness which is in part the darkness of slavery, in part the darkness of dereliction and remoteness, is intensely lit at important times. The book begins with the travels of the Conquistador, Antonio de Berrio, in search of El Dorado. He retires to Trinidad, where he is ousted by Ralegh, who is equally inflamed by the thought of native princes clad in gold dust. Both men tasted the same bitterness. Ralegh said of certain of his Spanish rivals: the Indians 'slewe them and buried them in the country so much sought. They gave them by that means a full and complete possession.' It was a fate that came to many. Others again went mad. When he returned to the West Indies 20 years after his first voyage, Ralegh's own wits were far from sound. His subsequent experiences did nothing to soothe them.

The famous victories, the glittering prizes, the discoverings and annexings, of Caribbean history turn to dust. The annals of El Dorado move to the rhythm of Ralegh's most melancholy poems:

> Even such is Time, that takes in trust
> Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
> And pays us but with earth and dust;
> Who in the dark and silent grave,
> When we have wandered all our ways,
> Shuts up the story of our days.

The Earl of Dudley and his party wander ceremoniously ashore in the Gulf of Paria, near the Pitch Lake. On the *qui vive* for gold, they are like men in a dream. Dust—or rather sand—is their reward:

> They got back to the ship between two and three in the morning. A blank place, that Gulf shore; but they had made it yield the drama of late hours and a midnight wade in full armour. They had had two adventures, of fireflies and the tide; and they had got a lot of sand. No Spaniard had appeared.

Towards the end of the 18th century, after the British had taken possession of Trinidad, Thomas Picton, who was later to make his mark at Waterloo, was sent out as military governor. The story of Picton is wonderfully told, and from it are hatched some further stories, notably that of Francisco Miranda, who spent years in the salons of Europe as a charming South American exile, scheming and lobbying for an invasion of the area by Britain and America, which would be good for business, and would dish the French. Picton's feud with Colonel Fullarton, a stiff-necked fellow from Ayrshire and India, is a choice item in the bulging dossiers of colonial acrimony: empire is bad for the nerves, as for the wits. The feud reached a climax when Picton was tried for the torture of a 14-year-old mulatto girl, Luisa Calderon. The trial was held in London and was presided over with exemplary lucidity by Lord Ellenborough; the whole affair dragged on and on, to be dispelled eventually by the glory won at Quatre Bras. Colonial wrongs referred to London, adventurers disgraced, their actions mired in the law's peculiarities: this theme is prefigured in Ralegh's arraignment. Ralegh was charged with four 'impostures': it was claimed, for instance, that there had been a deception about the existence of a gold mine. It's surprising that Naipaul does not make more of this prefiguring of the Picton affair, for impostures are a substantial element in his subject-matter. The resemblances between the two episodes run deep: there was a streak of Miranda—another impostor—in sweet Sir Walter.

Appendix 4 (continued)

Naipaul has always been interested in impostures. The fakeries of the 'mystic masseur' of his first novel are a case in point, and so is the recognition, by the thrusting Caribbean politicians of *The Mimic Men*, that the power they had fought for was an illusion, that 'no power was real which did not come from the outside.' Many of Naipaul's Caribbean characters are mimic men. And it is worth asking how fair it is to call their impostures Caribbean or colonial. It is also worth asking whether power, if it is to be as stringently defined as it is in Naipaul's fiction, is ever, anywhere in the world, to be called real.

This book is valuable simply as annals, as an enhancement of the record. English and Spanish narratives are collated; the history of slavery is co-ordinated with that of the Latin American libertarian movements. But the book is also valuable by virtue of the recapitulation, in various new keys, of the established themes of Naipaul's fiction: principally, as I say, the themes of imposture and illusion, considered as expressions of a colonial predicament. The theme of cruelty is important too. Acts of cruelty occur throughout the book, but seldom have they been less exclaimed over or deplored. Naipaul is disdainful: he refuses to go operatic over the torture of Luisa Calderon, which might sound like pure Bellini. The facts, the acts, are reported, instead, with a kind of dandyish asperity. In the Spanish narratives, he explains, 'great actions become mere activity,' and his own style could be regarded as a match for this Hidalgo dryness, in its concern to show that most of these great actions were very small.

Some may suppose that his desire to belittle the activities he writes about extends to his treatment of cruelty, that he is too fastidious to lend his voice to the operas and oratories in which cruelty is currently denounced, just as he is reluctant to seek out precursors among his characters for the libertarians of Black Power and of the newly independent African nations. I think myself this is a mistaken view. It's true that Naipaul can sometimes be cruel in his fiction. But his dryness here, as I read it, is as much as anything a way of acknowledging that there has always been cruelty, and that there still is. This is the opposite of understatement, if it is also the opposite of opera. We live in a country in which we set on dogs to tear stags to pieces. Complaints on the subject are held to be quaint, we 'deplore their tone'; it is 'in the best interests of the deer' that they should be torn to pieces I saw a letter recently by a good old man whom I know, written when he served, 50 years ago, in East Africa: the lash, he reported in a quiet way, was used on the blacks, 'and not very cannily either'. This dispassionateness may be objectionable, but it is also instructive. It intimates, as Naipaul's book does, that all history is the history of cruelty.

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